



Central Greece has lost much of its livestock, devastating flooding and disease killing over half of the region's sheep, cattle, and goats. (Alexandra Howland)

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A Distant Problem No Longer

How climate change is fuelling crime and fraying trust across Europe

The more the world warms, the more unstable many regions are becoming. Large parts of the planet are already suffering the consequences. But while there has been some focus on the effects on the poorest and most ecologically exposed, the vulnerabilities of Europe and other richer regions have been largely overlooked. As climate stresses and their fallout intensify »at home«, it's high time to shine the spotlight inwards on a set of challenges that may ultimately affect most of the global »wealthy«, too. This is a distant problem no longer.

In some ways, Europe might seem an unlikely candidate for climate-related instability. It does not have exclusionary political systems, and nor is a large part of its population engaged in agriculture, to mention two of the features scholars have identified as most likely to fuel such conflict globally. Nor, for all its shortcomings, does the continent exhibit the particularly poor governance that is principally responsible for causing climate shocks to manifest in violence elsewhere. Indeed, none of the troubles described in this report are wholly or even mainly due to climate change. They are all messy mixtures of climate and »classic« destabilisers, such as inequality.

But the closer one looks, the less surprising a backdrop Europe becomes for this kind of insecurity. It is densely populated, which means more competition for less predictably

available resources. It has more nation states clustered in a small area than anywhere else on Earth, which means that problems regularly require consultation across a uniquely high number of jurisdictions. After millennia of intensive settlement, much of Europe's natural landscape has been so manipulated that it's poorly placed to cope with »new« conditions. Urban areas, built for more reliably hospitable climates, lack the amenities needed to shield residents effectively from fiercer heat.

Europe is also in trouble from a purely climate perspective. At an average of 2°C above pre-industrial temperatures, it has warmed more than any other continent. Europeans from the Atlantic to the Aegean must now contend with a menacing array of climate shocks and stresses that include – but are not limited to – droughts, floods, wildfires and heatwaves. To add to the sense of sheer bewilderment that many citizens are feeling, conditions frequently yoyo from one extreme to the other, imposing unseasonal weather on people and places long used to a degree of predictability. The financial toll is also increasing in line with the challenges. In 2025 alone, extreme weather events cost an estimated €43 billion across the EU.

Then there's the politics. Much of Europe is struggling with formidable urban–rural divides, as climate stresses accentuate the gulf between the »haves« and the »have nots«.

Most European states face surging populist parties, many of whom have expertly tapped into the grievances of the »have nots«, and increasingly frequent interventions by malign actors, near and far, who have been quick to identify how ripe the issue of climate impacts is for exploitation. Together with significant inequalities and periodic economic slowdowns there is simply no shortage of levers for taking advantage of climate phenomena.

Naturally, the impact of these shocks is not felt uniformly across Europe. For the time being, Mediterranean and Balkan states are experiencing some of the most severe shocks. They tend to be hampered by less state capacity, broadly greater exposure to inclement conditions, and perhaps more exploitable socio-political fissures. But there is every reason to believe that this burden could soon be shared much more universally. Global experience suggests that some of the worst anti-state anger emerges when the authorities fail to meet public expectations of quality services. As climate change and other stresses continue to erode such services, even countries across wealthier northern Europe, with their generally higher citizen expectations of the state, may one day confront a dangerous backlash. Arguably, some already are.

This report, which is the first in-depth investigation into climate's contribution to crime and instability in Europe, is an attempt to identify a major blind spot in the literature, and by extension, in our policymaking. It lays out what climate-related disorder really looks like at a community level. It explores, in brief, how that disorder is merging with other climate and non-climate-related shocks to tear at Europe's social fabric and threaten the very foundations of its democracy. Above all, by illustrating the immediacy of the climate threat through some of its most arresting symptoms, *A Distant Problem No Longer* is a bid to bring home the extreme dangers posed by relative political inertia.

After all, as one much-repeated social media observation put it, »climate change will manifest [itself] as a series of disasters viewed through phones with footage that gets closer and closer to where you live until you're the one filming it«. With climate-related instability, as with climate impacts in general, that is very much where we are now here in Europe.

Structure and approach

A Distant Problem No Longer is subdivided into four sections. The first is centred on largely low-level crime and violence, which is an increasing fixture of rural and other »left behind« communities. The second focuses on the water and other resource tensions that are proliferating across the continent. The third section, which builds on the first two, lays out some of the ways in which climate change is destabilising Europe's democratic systems, and ultimately perhaps even its citizens' capacity to get along with one another at all. The report concludes with a number of »actionable« recommendations, but, critically, no clear-cut roadmap for policymakers. It is our contention that many of the necessary measures are already known to policymakers. By elucidating the current and some possible future dangers, we hope primarily to clarify the stakes.

Identifying climate's contribution to insecurity is difficult everywhere in the world. For one thing, climate stresses usually overlap with a multitude of non-climate-related drivers. Identifying climate's role in Europe's troubles may be even trickier. The relative newness of the topic means there are too few clear data points to draw on, while the low-level nature of much of the insecurity so far provides less incentive to dissect its underlying causes. All this makes compiling a report like this more difficult.

Because of the lack of statistics and other »generalisable« source material, *A Distant Problem No Longer* deploys numerous real-world examples and snapshots of »cli-

mate-insecurity in-action«, which represents some of the only evidence available. But there are also at least three positive reasons for taking this approach:

- Some climate security risks are largely impervious to quantitative research methods, and instead require the sort of observable and tip-of-the-iceberg »anecdotal« presented here.
- This report is intended to be much more of an overview than a comprehensive rundown of how climate change can fuel insecurity. As one of the first works on this topic in Europe, it has plenty of gaps, blind spots and limitations. The hope is that others will readily identify them and fill the void.
- Climate security historically has been a relatively inaccessible field. By producing a report that we hope is both compelling and comprehensible, our intention is to help shed additional light on a part of the climate discourse that needs broader public exposure.

Our report is based on extensive fieldwork in Italy and Greece, a comprehensive reading of the relevant literature, as well as considerable prior relevant work by the report's authors. Unless otherwise stated, all unsourced quotes and examples are drawn from the fieldwork, and most are brief excerpts of in-depth investigations. While conducting field research the authors extended anonymity to all sources, some of whom were wary of speaking ill of officials or their neighbours.



Storm Daniel displaced thousands in Thessaly, Greece, where few trust the flood embankments built to protect their communities. (Alexandra Howland)

Part 1. A climate for rural crime

For all the talk about the contribution of climate change to conflict and other geopolitically significant forms of violence, most global climate-related insecurity plays out at a very local level and in very undramatic-looking ways. The situation is no different in Europe.

Across the continent, most climate-related criminality and security issues occur with so little fanfare that even those living in their immediate vicinity aren't necessarily aware of them. Scarce water is procured and distributed illegally, perhaps more so now than at any point in recent European history. Hazardous waste is disposed of without regard for the law or an increasingly fragile landscape. Mindful of the possibilities that climate disasters so often present, everyone from opportunistic individuals to established criminal operators is taking advantage of fiercer and more frequent crises, and often in a manner that is scarcely conducive to keeping the peace.

But while much of the apparent inconspicuousness of this kind of criminality might be explained by its low-level and sometimes invisible form, a lot also hinges on where most of it is happening, namely rural areas. People in isolated communities may be more vulnerable to certain offences. »Out of sight and out of mind«, rural areas receive less media coverage, have fewer police patrols and, given their generally sparse populations, often present less risky backdrops for lawbreaking. Studies suggest that rural areas experience less crime on average than their urban equivalents, but [certain forms of crime](#) can be more prevalent in the countryside, such as house burglaries.

Rural people may have more incentive to break the law. So many of them are dependent on agriculture, the most cli-

mate-vulnerable of livelihoods and one that in many places is deteriorating in line with warming temperatures. In large part because of farmers' struggles, rural areas, which are generally already less well off than the national average, are getting poorer. This decline is only widening the gap between rural and urban prosperity, with important political consequences (which will be touched on in Part 3) and significant ramifications for community security (which will be elaborated upon here). In simple terms, the profound sense of injustice that so many agrarian communities feel may conspire against law-abiding behaviour, especially if people feel that officials are too focused on the fortunes of electorally more important cities to spare much thought for rural concerns.

Already, farmers across the EU alone are losing an average of [€28 billion](#) plus a year to »adverse« weather. That sum could increase by up to 66 per cent by 2050, according to recent studies. Most of those losses are uninsured and are likely to hit farmers who are deeply in debt from previous crises and so unable to secure additional credit.

Furthermore, rural occupations, pastimes and ways of life may almost require crime, or so many locals see it. Rural people, who are more beholden to natural resource use than most urbanites, may feel compelled to breach the law, for instance, in pursuit of water and other needs. For example, the imposition of tighter water use regulations due to drought has sparked significant blowback from farmers, many of whom see these new regulations as additional obstacles to already wafer-thin profit margins. Consequently, they may be more disposed to infringe them, and their neighbours more minded to turn a blind eye.

Hydro-burglary

Water theft is common across Europe, though its form and magnitude vary greatly from place to place. Unregistered wells are a fixture in many countries, including Spain, which has at least [half a million illegal](#) ones. Many of them have been dug by farmers seeking irrigation sources that are more reliable than ever less dependable rains, but for whom tighter conservation measures can make securing permission overly difficult or expensive. Drought is reducing aquifer recharge in parts of the continent. At the same time, [withdrawal rates are surging](#) as consumers compensate themselves for those weaker rains. In these circumstances, some farmers and businesses are inclined to take matters into their own hands. In 2023, police in Andalusia [arrested two dozen](#) farmers for irrigating thirsty tropical fruits with unsanctioned wells.

In other instances, where wells are legal, farmers may far surpass the abstraction limits imposed by local or national authorities. With [minimal or no monitoring](#), well operators face few obstacles in, for example, watering up to 100 hectares of land with a permit that allows for a third of that. Officials may also periodically forbid the cultivation of certain water-intensive crops, only to see farmers growing them anyway. The higher prices that those crops frequently fetch amid drought can be incentive enough to disregard the rules.

In yet other instances, individuals and businesses may seek and sell water from illicit sources of a different nature. Motivated at least partly by water bills that are [on average rising](#), municipal water officers report regular illegal connections to the mains water supply, deliveries of unclean water that's presented as potable, and the procuring of water from protected nature reserves, which are often out of bounds to commercial water extractors but may nevertheless be exploited during water crunches. All the above can provide rich money-making opportunities for criminal networks, a number of whom have been implicated in the sale of extortionately priced water across southern Europe during times of scarcity.

»There are always people who profit from a crisis, especially if they think the law doesn't apply to them«, one Sicilian farmer said. »And water is of course one of the few things you can't go without. You pay what you need to pay.« In 2022, he bought water for his olive grove from private tanker operators for about €5 per 1000 litres. By 2024, those businessmen were demanding €11 for the same quantity.

Among many other examples of water-related crime, the expansion or renewal of Europe's water infrastructure in the face of harsher climatic conditions is providing ample possibilities for corruption. Dozens of dam construction projects, such as Sicily's unfinished Blufi, are subject to allegations of [rampant kickbacks](#), their huge costs and large workforces making them attractive targets for exploitation. Though less conspicuous than surface-level infrastructure,

the many-billion-euro upgrades of subterranean pipe networks which will be required to minimise losses of scarcer water have proven every bit as vulnerable to corruption. French conglomerates Veolia and Suez are among those [accused of improprieties](#) in the pursuit of contracts across Europe.

The cumulative cost of illegal consumption and leaky infrastructure is massive, losing the continent an estimated 25 per cent of all treated water every year – and depriving some areas of most of their supply. The Bulgarian city of Shumen reportedly loses no less than [84 per cent](#).

Looting the fields

Drought, wildfires and other climate shocks are driving up the prices of many agricultural commodities, and, in the process, creating incentives for the theft of now valuable products. The olive oil sector seems to have been hardest hit by this phenomenon. Groves and processing facilities have experienced dramatic upticks in robberies in recent years, mostly in Spain, Italy and Greece, the world's largest olive oil producers. The volume of theft appears closely correlated with rainfall, the lack of which fuelled price increases of [up to 70](#) per cent between 2023 and 2024.

Some of these seizures are large scale, with hundreds of thousands of euros worth of oil stolen overnight by large groups with significant equipment. But many are perpetrated by opportunistic individuals raiding households' personal production, fruit from the olive trees themselves, and reportedly even the [pots of olive oil](#) that some Mediterranean families leave in cemeteries to light lamps in commemoration of the dead. The heightened threat is reflected in dramatically beefed up security measures, which range from police escorts for delivery trucks, as sometimes happens in Italy's Puglia, to the installation of infra-red cameras, reinforcing fences with barbed wire and even microchipping tree branches and batches of olives.

Seeds, and to a certain but lesser extent citrus fruit, have been similarly targeted. Through drought and burgeoning demand, the global price of pistachios has soared, and with it burglaries of the crop. In and around the Sicilian town of Bronte, which produces Europe's most prized pistachios, police have introduced [roving helicopter patrols](#) to accompany officers on foot at harvest time after years of looting. Pistachios are targeted even away from the production areas. In 2016, two men were found guilty of [stealing almost 1 million](#) euros' worth from Belgian supermarkets. Gangs have perpetrated similar crimes in Germany, the Netherlands and other countries in recent years.

As growing conditions and yields waver, purveyors of some high value agricultural commodities have also been accused of adulterating the quality of whatever products are harvestable, and then passing them off as something they are not. This may be true of some olive oil, which is [inaccurately presented](#) as »extra virgin« by Italian organised crime

Across Europe, fertiliser vendors have been undercut by a surge in illicit chemical use. (Alexandra Howland)

outfits, in part because drought is dehydrating olives and lowering oil quality. Among many other foodstuffs, this may be true of highly prized forms of honey, the production of which has been badly affected by wildfires and other climate-related stresses across south-eastern Europe, in particular. Up to 80 per cent of all honey sold in Europe is tainted, industry figures say, as prices are mostly too low to accurately reflect beekeepers' costs.

Dirtying the landscape

The more agricultural incomes drop off due to climate and non-climate related challenges, the more some rural peoples are turning – or falling victim – to polluting activities. With thinner economic margins, fewer farmers appear willing or perhaps able to abide by sometimes onerous waste and wastewater disposal laws. The consequences are writ large on much of Europe's environment. More than 60 per cent of the continent's surface water sources do not meet EU water standards, largely due to agricultural waste.

Some of this illicit disposal is a consequence of calculated farmer behaviour – and not just in the disposal of their own refuse. According to Legambiente, Italy's largest environmental NGO, farmers may deem it more profitable to accept waste dumps on their land than to grow crops, especially at a time of unpredictable yields. Some of these discards include toxic substances, which may taint soils and jeopardise future cultivation, and many aggravate the impact of climate change on those farmers and their neighbours. At a time when there is less water on average, more of what remains is sullied to the point of unusability.

For similar economic reasons, farmers across Europe appear to be turning to more illegal fertilisers and pesticides (see Greece case study). These chemicals, which can be up to 80 per cent cheaper than regulated products, account for around 14 per cent of all pesticides used in the EU today, and perhaps double that figure in some Member States. The real costs often materialise only later, however. In addition to the environmental impact on Europe's waters and wildlife, these illicit chemicals, most allegedly smuggled in from Turkey and other countries beyond the bloc and then distributed by criminal networks, have been implicated in significant public health crises across the continent.

But farmers are also bearing the brunt of criminal gangs' growing awareness of their weakened hand as climate and other stresses bite. Farmers' generally strained finances, sometimes limited access to authorities, and location on large tracts of isolated land can leave them particularly vulnerable to unsolicited dumping. In the case of Italy, farmers need to demonstrate that they did everything they could to prevent illicit dumping. If they cannot – and with



limited time and perhaps funds for legal assistance, many cannot – they must pay for the clean-up themselves. The Italian illegal waste disposal market was worth €8.8 billion in 2023, according to a recent but not yet publicly available study, much of it controlled by mafia clans. Abandoned agricultural land is disproportionately singled out for dumping.

Crimes of opportunity

Criminals love chaos, and climate change is propelling an awful lot of it. With more frequent and debilitating extreme weather events, many countries are experiencing what can feel like unbroken series of climate-fuelled disasters. Established and opportunistic lawbreakers haven't been slow to take advantage of these floods, fires, heatwaves and more.

The crimes include looting during and after disasters, such as the deadly 2024 floods in the Valencia area, in which clothing shops in particular were reportedly targeted, and in parts of the Czech Republic inundated by Storm Boris in the same year. In Spain, vigilante groups, some wielding farm equipment, soon sprang up in reaction to what they saw as inadequate state protection of property. In an illustration of how popular responses to disaster can cascade into deeper insecurity, the out-migration of rural peoples to cities following extreme weather events sometimes leaves their communities of origin even more vulnerable to burglaries and other offences. The population of predominantly rural parts of the EU fell by more than 8 per cent between 2014 and 2024. The urban population rose by about 6 per cent.

And these crimes include the utilisation of extreme weather events for lawbreaking. Intent on freeing up land for development, masking various abuses, or inflicting revenge on adversaries, criminals are accused of igniting a significant portion of the wildfires that have consumed huge tracts of land in recent years. The intensification of the European fire season may be giving these arsonists greater deniability, while other climate stresses may add motivation due to agriculture and forestry's declining economic attractiveness. In 2024 almost 60 per cent of fires in Italy were deliberate, according to a government minister.

Cold, hard violence

The relationship between violence and extreme heat is inexact, but very real. Research shows that human aggression frequently spikes in high temperatures, and that frustration, impulsivity and other traits that may contribute to violence-spinning behaviour are also more likely in those conditions. Given the kind of heat exposure that an infra-structurally unprepared Europe is forecast to experience over the coming years, the continent's future might look a good deal more violent. Parts of Madrid and Milan have already warmed more than 3 °C on average, while the largely uncooled London Underground can reach temperatures in excess of 30 °C for weeks on end in the summer, a temperature deemed too hot to [legally transport livestock](#).

Some of this violence is of a »generalised« nature. Police records disclose more gun crime in some countries during hotter periods of the year. Some [29 per cent](#) of shootings in Sweden are perpetrated in the summer months, as opposed to 22 per cent in the winter. Likewise, in London, violent crime is on average [14 per cent higher](#) when the temperature is above 20 °C than when it's below 10 °C. (How-

ever, in these instances, as in most others, environmental conditions may be only one driver of maximal incidents in summer.) And some of this violence has a political or economic dimension. Protests and riots can be more common and more intense during hot weather, even if high heat and extreme weather events may reduce numbers beyond a certain threshold.

Research in Europe and farther afield also suggests that domestic violence in both rural and urban areas is particularly pronounced during and after heatwaves. Femicides often spike during the summer, and interviews with survivors of gender-based violence in Athens indicate a causal, rather than just a correlatory connection with high temperatures. The links that these women identified to one of this report's authors include violence related to sleeplessness in stifling, uncooled apartments, heightened alcohol consumption during hot weather, and arguments over clothing. In summer, many women said that the lighter, more revealing clothing they often wore was perceived as a »come on«. Conversely, in conservative families, some women's desire to wear less restrictive garments can be a source of conflict.



Extreme weather events leave villages like Metamorfosi exposed to looters. (Alexandra Howland)

Greece case study

Crises, it is said, bring out the best in people. The Greek villages at the receiving end of Europe's most devastating climate-related shocks have had ample occasion to find that out the hard way. When a mega flood buried much of the pancake-flat Thessaly region in up to six metres of water in September 2023, volunteers arrived from across the country, some towing boats to reach stranded communities. In intense heatwaves of up to 45 °C, farmers frequently help one another out as best their diminished circumstances allow. Through flurries of forest fires, many of which are fought by poorly equipped locals at enormous personal risk, »it's a miracle that anyone still talks to anyone!« one official suggested.

But when they keep on coming crises can also drain good will, exhaust solidarity and ultimately bleed into very different kinds of behaviour. Depleted by yet another year of poor rains, the people of rural Thessaly have had plenty of opportunity to bear out that unhappy truism.

Around Karditsa, in the region's southwest, locals are furious at what they see as attempts by the city of Larissa to burgle their water. That water, much of which flows from now-dangerously low mountain reservoirs, is insufficient for their own needs, let alone those of downstream areas, they say. By sneakily opening sluice gates, as farmers accuse Larissa officials of doing, they're ensuring that everyone goes thirsty. The fear that other municipalities may make further attempts on those canals has created a culture of suspicion, one in which villagers keep a close watch on unfamiliar-looking vehicles and waylay them to verify their intentions if they stop near the em-

bankments. »Even between farmers, you have fights over who will water first«, said the president of one of the area's largest agricultural associations. »If there's not enough, I will come to see my fellow human as a foe after a while.«

Across Thessaly, farmers in this heavily agricultural area are largely united by a shared revulsion towards the central government. Unhappy with what they see as broken or only partly fulfilled promises to compensate them for their losses following Storm Daniel, the 2023 mega flood, they've frequently blocked one of the main north-south highways, and, as in other European capitals, driven their tractors to Athens to protest. They threaten to do it again. 17 people drowned in the floods, and hundreds of other mostly elderly evacuees died soon afterwards in circumstances that locals attribute to the shock of displacement. Two years on, dozens of villages remain near-abandoned, their houses daubed with red triangles to signify uninhabitability, and the surrounding pasture largely devoid of livestock because hundreds of thousands of them drowned in 2023.

However, it's the very small-scale criminality that may truly speak to the extent of village desperation. For example, what water is available is increasingly subject to various forms of illicit extraction, illicit distribution and »anti-social« behaviour. Drought-battered farmers have dug wells without permission, and extracted more water than authorised from those that are licensed. Though not overtly criminal, many farmers have taken to placing their pumps metres upstream of others along irrigation



Fluctuating water access fuels tensions between municipalities in Greece. Irrigation canals have become potent flashpoints. (Alexandra Howland)

canals, which enhances their chances of meeting their water needs but at the considerable cost of frayed community relations. »This is now cannibalism«, the agricultural association president said. »Human taking advantage of human.«

More dangerously, perhaps, use of illicit fertilisers and pesticides has surged across Thessaly. These chemicals, while not new to Greece, have become much more common since the flood, according to both farmers and fertiliser vendors. Distributed by criminal gangs, they appeal to farmers who remain heavily indebted and so lack the money to purchase sufficient regulated products, which can cost up to 50 per cent of their earnings. The trouble is that, in attempting to save money, farmers may be inadvertently sabotaging themselves and their neighbours. These illicit products don't necessarily work well because there's no quality control, and few instructions on how and when to use them, given their illegality. They also

appear to be harming human and environmental health. Officials across rural Thessaly report a surge in respiratory and other illnesses, many of which they link to toxic agricultural products.

Then there's the property theft, perhaps the ultimate killer of community trust. Especially in the immediate aftermath of Storm Daniel but even now, police are grappling with looters, some of whom are pilfering the houses of those who've moved away. The shrinkage of village populations ensures that burglars face fewer deterrents, while the destruction of fencing by the floodwaters has removed some physical obstacles. It has all contributed to a situation in which the few remaining residents keep a beady eye on their properties – and on one another. In Metamorfosi, one of several communities that have voted to permanently displace themselves for fear of similar future disasters, an old farmer, Thomas, ventures back to his old house from nearby Palamas most days. He comes in large part to tend to his vegetable garden. But, having painstakingly restored his house, he says he's damned if he'll lose any possessions now.



Many farmers are at one another's throats over water use, community cohesion wavering in many instances due to perceived overuse by some individuals. (Alexandra Howland)



In drought-stricken San Cataldo, Sicily, rooftops are lined with private water cisterns. (Giuseppe Gerbasi)

Part 2. A war (of words?) over water

For years now, climate change has been presented as a kindler of »water wars«, a force liable to pitch nation states against one another in pursuit of the most important of resources. But while there's been a good deal of sensational and unhelpful media coverage to that effect, there is no doubt that water is emerging as a more severe contributor to tensions, especially at a local level. Once more, the situation is no different in Europe.

Much of this strain is an extension of pre-existing grievances, many of which can quickly bleed into this salient »new« area. Already up against one another, villagers, different kinds of water consumers, sub-national actors and even nation states can quickly transfer longstanding resentments into the water domain. As an emotionally resonant issue, water is frequently ripe for rhetorical escalation, not least if policymakers use it as a means of deflecting attention from their own real or perceived failures closer to home.

But as unpredictable access intensifies, water is also emerging as a bigger bone of contention in areas in which community relations were previously generally untroubled. In these places, ordinary people and elected politicians may have limited experience of water negotiations, and, because of their histories of relative water plenty, scant familiarity with conservation measures and other means of »scarcity-proofing« economies. That way trouble lies. Some [34 per cent of EU territory](#) – and more than 40 per cent of its population – were affected by water scarcity for at least part of 2022, a figure that sometimes doubles in southern European states during the summer.

Ultimately, future water projections suggest there is much worse in store. Recent analysis estimates that [almost a](#)

[fifth](#) of Europeans could experience extreme water scarcity by 2050, with up to 13 per cent of GDP also at risk. Drought alone may contribute up to [€45 billion a year](#) in losses by 2100. And while drier Mediterranean littoral states are forecast to bear the brunt of these shortages, their northern peers, many hobbled by outdated infrastructure that's designed to expel excess water rather than conserve it, will not be spared.

»Whisky is for drinking; water is for fighting«

The more water access falters, the more it is emerging as a contributor to inter-personal conflict across Europe. While statistics are in short supply given the difficulty of parsing the precise causes of fights, the anecdotal evidence is compelling. Officials in the Greek town of Palamas in Thessaly say that roughly 70 per cent of the disputes they mediate are related to water, a significantly higher percentage than in past decades and a major consumer of municipality time. »Gentlemen's agreements are made and then broken because there is no water«, the deputy mayor said. »That leads to all sorts of big problems between people.«

In Italy's Caltanissetta, one of many towns and cities afflicted by ever more regular droughts in the country's south, locals tell stories of frequent fights over water and because of its absence. In the case of the former, civil defence officers frequently had to intervene to stop clashes at water distribution points in 2024, the city's ex-mayor said. In the case of the latter, many people's inability to properly cook, clean and wash themselves triggered frequent tensions and some fistfights between irritable and uncomfortable locals, residents said.

Around Athens, areas afflicted by severe wildfires in recent years have even experienced brawls over water between different groups of firefighters. In one instance, while fight-

ing a massive fire on Mount Penteli in 2024, professional and volunteer fire units came to blows, the volunteers accusing the professionals of denying them sufficient water to combat blazes that, in many instances, threatened the volunteers' own houses or communities.

Farmers vs the rest

Most of Europe's tetchiest water situations are centred on agriculture; or, more particularly, on agriculture's engagement with tourism and other parts of the economy. Farming accounts for well over half of water consumption in southern European states, and as its needs grow due to fiercer heat and as overall water supply vacillates, the sector is coming into greater conflict with other water users, many of whose requirements are also surging.

A lot of the most pointed clashes are connected to tourism, which is most heavily concentrated in many of the same Mediterranean countries where water availability is worst. In almost every littoral state, farmers claim that their water share is being cut to satisfy the needs of the hospitality industry, which generally employs more people and contributes a larger share of GDP than agriculture. The redirection of water has consequently emerged as a significant grievance, and one that farmers have not been shy in harnessing. For example, a massive expansion in tourist infrastructure along the Albanian coast has [sparked protests](#) from locals worried that they'll lose surface water share, just as rainfall becomes less reliable.

But farmers are also at odds with environmentalists (and the broader outlook that they often represent), many of whom feel that authorities are sapping water resources and despoiling the landscape in order to buttress crops during periods when weaker rains no longer provide sufficient irrigation. Around Spain's [Doñana National Park](#), activists are furious at what they see as the destruction of an ecologically vital – and touristic – wetland in order to sustain strawberry and other fruit cultivation. The left-wing central government's support of environmental preservation and the right-wing regional government's support of the farmers has given the dispute a broader political complexion. Police and environmental protesters have fought [thousands-strong pitched battles](#) in southwestern France for similar reasons.

However, as rains falter and pressure on water resources mounts across the continent, these contests are spreading into parts of Europe better known for having too much water, rather than too little. In the German state of Brandenburg, farming and other [communities are up in arms](#) about a Red Bull-owned water bottling facility's high levels of extraction at a time when they feel their own needs are not being met. Locals who [opposed the construction](#) of a nearby Tesla factory made similar arguments before its eventual opening in 2022. Its annual water consumption, akin to that of a town of 30,000, is excessive in an area riven with harvest failures, opponents argued.

Intra-state water woes

The impact of climate change tends to be extremely uneven, frequently afflicting already dry places with even weaker rains and then inundating the well-endowed with more water than they can safely handle. The consequent divergence in water fortunes, as well as attempts to rectify them through transfers from the water-rich to the water-poor, is firing yet another type of tension.

Most of these transfers involve the movement of water from lightly-populated regions to urban areas, many of which have long since outstripped local resources' capacity to provide for residents' needs. Cities such as Athens are now sustained by distant mountain rivers, several of which have been redirected into tunnels and then fed into Attica's reservoirs. (With water demand surging by around [6 per cent a year](#) in the Athens area, authorities may need to annex additional waterways over the coming years.) Likewise in Germany, Austria, France and Italy, among others. Having outpaced sometimes shrinking nearby resources, Paris, Vienna, Rome, Frankfurt am Main and Stuttgart all import water from up to 100 km away, a scenario ripe for future trouble during periods of acute drought.

In the process, however, officials are arousing anger within communities at the losing end of the supply chain, plenty of whom don't necessarily feel they're well-resourced enough to part with anything. For example, the Hessisches Ried area south of Frankfurt is [reeling from the city's appetite](#); its forests, wetlands and some residents are struggling to cope with the losses. Rural residents across Europe suggest that this is yet another prioritisation of city needs over those of the already neglected countryside. This provides more grist for the mill of rural people's sense of abandonment. According to the German Environment Agency (UBA), intensifying heatwaves and droughts have already fuelled [more water conflict](#) across the country, especially in the northeast and in the Lower Rhine Valley.

But as shortages bite, authorities are also increasingly having to choose which provinces to prioritise. This is the most toxic of political dilemmas. Spain's Tagus river transfer scheme is a clear case in point. Since the 1970s, farmers in southern Murcia and Alicante provinces have emerged as some of Europe's biggest fruit and vegetable producers, in part thanks to a series of canals that ferry Tagus water several hundred kilometres south. But deepening drought – and expanded crop cultivation – in the central Castilla-La Mancha region through which the river flows [threaten that longstanding arrangement](#). If the more northerly residents get their way, the transfers will soon be no more, to the southerners' tremendous economic loss.

Against this messy backdrop, even efforts to climate-proof countries and communities may fuel tensions and/or necessitate damaging trade-offs. Water experts in the United Kingdom maintain that their country will require significant new – and divisive – infrastructure if it's to avoid shortages

within the next decade. Facing a deficit of up to [five billion litres a day](#), a third of current public supply, the government looks set to greenlight additional reservoirs, all of which are triggering considerable anger among those whose land and perhaps homes will have to make way for projects that are largely designed for [distant cities](#).

Water conflict writ large

The idea of water as a source of inter-state conflict may seem far-fetched in a European context. And, insofar as it relates to a »hot« war, it almost certainly is, at least for the foreseeable future. But, with more states mired in water challenges big and small, transboundary rivers have become a significantly bigger cause of cross-border friction than is broadly understood. Given that almost two-thirds of all European river systems span frontiers – and that almost two-thirds of the world’s rivers experienced »[abnormal](#)« conditions in 2024 – there is tremendous potential for more serious tensions to come.

Dams, a frequent cause of strife on other continents, are responsible for their share of angst in Europe, too. Moldova remains wary of the [ambition](#) of fellow EU membership candidate Ukraine to expand a dam along the Dniester river, which supplies much of the landlocked state’s water. Having seen how Russia weaponised Ukraine’s own water infrastructure, including through [the destruction of the Kakhovka dam](#) in 2023, policymakers in Chisinau are mindful both of how upstream facilities could be deployed to bring them to their knees in the event of further Russian advances, and of the possibility of less water.

Transboundary water agreements – or sometimes a lack thereof – have also emerged as domestic political foot-balls, issues that are susceptible to appeals to nationalist sentiment and consequently unmoored from their actual

merits and pitfalls. For example, the Bulgarian government’s extension of its agreement with Greece on the waters of the Arda/Ardas river was [decried as a »sellout«](#) by the country’s pro-Russia right.

With its unprecedentedly interwoven geography and inter-dependent environmental and economic systems, Europe is likely to be even more subject to water-related shocks and misunderstandings than other regions. These include issues that might pass almost unnoticed during periods of political calm but that could reverberate more dangerously during tenser, misinformation-riddled times. An example of this was when the Swiss Air Force [accidentally took water](#) from a drought-affected French lake to relieve thirsty cows, rather than from one of its own bodies of water. So too along the Turkey–Greece land border. There, patrolling troops have occasionally [strayed across the sometimes tetchy frontier](#), their sense of direction thrown off by both dangerously high or alarmingly low flows along the river which demarcates much of the border.

And it includes more serious dislocations. Drought in France has sometimes led to the [suspension of electricity transfers](#) to Germany, as low river levels leave insufficient water to cool nuclear power plants. In that event, Paris is more inclined to prioritise its own people’s needs over those of neighbours. Norway has [threatened similar action](#) when poor rains have left its hydro-electricity plants unable to meet domestic consumption, let alone that of the other European countries to which it’s contracted. If events in other affluent parts of the world are any guide, not even Europe’s wealth of water sharing treaties are any guarantee of continued stability in the long run. The increasing breakdown of [US–Mexico](#) and perhaps US–Canada water agreements amid intense drought and zero-sum politics may be a bitter taste of how swiftly previously harmonious disputes can be unsettled.



By August 2024, months of drought had nearly dried up Sicily's only natural lake, Lago Pergusa. (Giuseppe Gerbasi)

Sicily case study

When, in the early summer of 2024, the taps ran dry in the central Sicilian town of San Cataldo, residents initially took it in their stride. They'd unhappily grown used to water that came only every seven days or so, an inconvenience that required them to fill rooftop tanks to tide them over in the meantime. They'd also become painfully accustomed to some of the highest water prices in Italy. All this despite receiving some of its lowest wages. But, as the heat picked up, the drought dragged on through September and October, and entire months went by without home water supply, they – and so many of their peers across the island – realised that this was no ordinary crisis.

Tensions between the agricultural and the tourist sectors sharpened, as many inland farmers became convinced that the water needs of the largely coastal hotels and restaurants were being prioritised, even as their crops withered and some of their animals died from dehydration. For their part, tourist operators say they weren't exactly well supplied, either. Some hotels had to turn away guests for want of water; others had to pay private tanker operators up to 100 euros for a 1,000-litre load just to stay open, which was far more than in rural areas and quite prohibitive for businesses with narrow margins. »It's like two poor men fighting for a piece of bread«, said one San Cataldo area farmer of the unease between struggling industries.

Anger at the authorities escalated because, ultimately, people felt this was their fault. They had a point. The impact of drought was magnified by Sicily's poorly maintained pipe network, which loses up to 50 per cent of its

flow to leaks, and which contributes to the lofty bills that all islanders must pay. The cost of all extracted water, including that which is lost en route, is divided among the shrinking number of consumers. At the same time, as the water situation worsened through autumn 2024, residents were frequently forced to traipse to sometimes distant watering holes to fill municipality-approved containers, while still paying their official water bills and some for supplementary private tankers.

Hot, anxious and uncomfortable, many townspeople even started to turn on one another, furious at how almost every part of their lives had been turned upside down. With much less local production, fruit and vegetable prices surged, a kilo of tomatoes going for up to twice what it had in 2023, which forced some families to rein in their consumption of fresh food, while others, in the absence of sufficient water to wash goods, turned to frozen produce. Plenty of people felt almost imprisoned in their houses, both because they felt embarrassed at the irregularity of their showers and due to the uncertainty of when the water would actually flow. »There was a day when I wanted to go to the sea but it was the day when the water was going to come«, said one irate resident of Enna, a parched provincial capital. »All this has limited our freedom. This goes against our dignity.«

Above all, a fierce mutual suspicion and animosity developed. »This man could keep his cafe running only because he received illegally sourced water«, residents speculated (seemingly correctly, in plenty of instances). »That woman was engaged in an exploitative water tanker business«, some of which hiked their prices in line with



During severe drought, San Cataldo residents walk long distances to fill rationed containers at public watering points. (Giuseppe Gerbasi)

the intensity of the crisis. By the time late autumn rolled around, still without rain, the situation was desperate.

It was at this point, however, that tensions between communities, or more particularly between their respective municipalities, took on an even more dangerous new complexion. With their local reservoir less than 1 per cent full, the mayor and council of Troina, an imposing hilltop community 1,000 metres up in the shadow of Etna, did something drastic. It was unreasonable, they felt, that water was being dispatched to San Cataldo and other distant communities, some 100km away, when they were going thirsty themselves. Stealing into the reservoir's valve room in late November, officials and hundreds of trailing residents cut all connections from the dam, except their own. Were it not for exceptionally timely rains a few days later, there's no telling how long the recriminations might have lasted.

After plentiful precipitation through the winter and spring of 2025, communities across Sicily have been granted temporary relief. Lago di Ancipa, the Troina reservoir, was full by early May. Farmers harvested a bumper wheat crop. But the problem, everyone agrees, is not going



Privately run 'water houses' offer another source of water. (Giuseppe Gerbasi)

away. Rural communities remain upset at how their resources are being exploited to service the cities, some of which leave them with insufficient water for their own purposes. Water remains expensive – and irregular. Even after that rich winter, much of San Cataldo still went without piped water for two months early in 2025. Locals say you can tell when the water is flowing by the sudden flurry of clothes washing, plant watering and house cleaning.

It is for that reason, local activists say, that Sicily needs a water »revolution«. Meeting near Enna's millennium-old castle, Monia, a protest leader and one of thousands in a mostly women-led movement (»because we manage the home«), explained why their cause is gaining momentum. For as long as the network remains so neglected and beholden to special interests and, perhaps, the Mafia, nothing will change, she alleges. Indeed, with a deteriorating climate context and residual anger over Troina's actions, the situation will only worsen. It is incumbent on them to force local authorities' hand. »To leave citizens in 2025 without prime basic needs is unacceptable«, she said. »That is why these protests resonate.«



After deadly floods, protesters in Valencia clash with police, demanding the resignation of regional leader Carlos Mazón. (picture alliance / Anadolu | Jose Miguel Fernandez)

Part 3. A fraying social fabric

Rocked by a series of climate and other stresses, Europeans' relations with one another are coming under intense pressure. Much of the instability described in Part 1 is fueling rural distrust that is, at least in part, reproducing itself across more populated areas. Many of the disputes over water described in Part 2 may be something of a canary in the coalmine with regard to a broader erosion of the European social fabric. After all, when trust over water is lost, trust elsewhere can soon prove fragile, too. Combined with the impact of wider socio-political disruptions, a few of which are explored in this section, these developments represent perhaps the most profound climate-related threat to Europe's peace and stability, a source of distress that policymakers would gladly do without.

The data tell a mixed but generally negative story: Europeans are on balance less inclined to trust one another than in previous years, and trust is declining most dramatically among the poor, the rural and other marginalised groups. [The statistics on institutional trust](#) present a similar, even bleaker, picture: confidence in national governments, traditional media and democracy has declined in many countries, while faith in political leaders has plummeted. Very few command majority support. Most have high [unfavourability ratings](#).

Some of this fragmentation may be attributable to »bad faith« actors operating both domestically and internationally. As the final case study illustrates, foreign governments and extreme domestic forces are seizing upon the confusion wrought by climate shocks and stresses to sow distrust and division. By taking advantage of crises, these parties are arguably behaving like looters who steal into battered rural communities under cover of extreme weather

events, only with far more enduring consequences. Political parties, especially on the hard right of the spectrum, have been quick to exploit that distrust, often further fraying communal relations in the process. But most of climate's contribution to an eroding social fabric rests on even knot-tier and perhaps less tractable ground.

A world of inequalities

Climate change is beginning to leave its mark on almost every sector of the European economy. Though a detailed assessment of climate's impact on the continent's finances is well beyond the scope of this report, the consequences for transport, energy supply and economic productivity – among many other areas – are increasingly clear. In 2025, for example, record heat and surging electricity demand triggered widespread [power outages](#) in Italy, forcing the evacuation of department stores in Florence and the closure of businesses in dozens of other cities. The 2024 floods in Valencia may have sliced around [0.2 per cent off](#) Spain's GDP.

At the same time, many of the government services that deprived – and even well off – households turn to at times of crisis are likely to worsen or diminish as responses to climate shocks and stresses siphon off much needed resources.

All the while, bills are projected to rise, as a result of which people may be paying more for food, home insurance and other goods and services, the quality of which may also deteriorate. For example, upgrades to electricity grids have contributed to Europe's unprecedentedly high electricity costs. Considerable expenditure is required to gird the system against worse wildfires and storms, and much of it is passed on to consumers. Climate-induced infrastructure

damage and water theft of the sort described in Part 1 have, in turn, fuelled very high water charges.

The net result of all of this includes more and deeper inequalities, and more numerous and increasingly exploitable entry points for hostile actors. In some parts of Greece's Thessaly, residents are already seeing the proliferation of new economic tensions. Wealthier farmers are often able to safeguard their fields against drought, while many desperate smallholders are selling their land. The natural outcome of this is consolidation into larger plots. This is creating something of a two-tier class system. Many villagers feel that this harks back to the feudal era. »This area is going back to what it was hundreds of years ago, with a bunch of rich landowners and peasants«, said a farmer in Gefyria. »Even the banks see the rich differently after big losses, and lend them more.« One Sicilian journalist put it in even starker terms following the summer of 2024, during which the taps ran dry on much of the island and water profiteers provided some of the few deliveries. »If you have money, you get water«, one local journalist put it. »If you don't, you don't.« They are not »all in this together«.

A loss of state legitimacy

Confronted with all of the above and other crises, governments will face growing public discontent, regardless of the proficiency of their responses to climate change. Given the low levels of trust and support, few governments are likely to receive the benefit of the doubt from citizens, many of whom are inclined to attribute challenges to incompetence or corruption that may simply be beyond states' capacity to resolve. Climate-related disasters have already contributed to changes in government across Europe. Mass casualty wildfires outside Athens in 2018 – and officials' response to them – helped usher in a new government in Greece the following year.

Mainstream parties look set to suffer most from these dynamics. In most cases, they will be unable to provide satisfactory explanations. Extremist actors will not be so constrained. Many of them have not been shy in pinning these failures on a revolving cast of familiar scapegoats. [Studies in Sweden](#) found that higher electricity prices can translate into greater support for the far right among low-income families. Even climate action can empower hardliners. [Research in Milan](#) shows that drivers affected by pollution-related car bans were significantly more likely to support hard-right parties, while agrarian communities of the kind that featured heavily in Parts 1 and 2 have displayed similar voting patterns in many instances. Populists may easily exploit perceptions that mitigation measures inordinately harm rural and other »left behind« peoples.

Most dangerously of all perhaps, the increasing inability of political systems to handle issues that have no easy solutions represents a golden opportunity for extra-political actors. The fallout from the Covid crisis illustrates the kind of sense of dislocation and »wild« behaviour that an atmos-

phere of constant crisis can bring. The even greater confusion and often unwanted changes that climate stresses accelerate may be fertile soil for cults, conspiracy theorists and extremists of all stripes, many of which offer people a clear narrative in the most confounding of circumstances, albeit at the cost of broader societal cohesion.

A common pattern

Extreme events create moments of fear and confusion among populations and people who lack sufficient orientation and reliable information. In such conditions, emotionally charged explanations blaming powerful actors – governments or elites – spread easily. In such circumstances there is no bandwidth for more complex accounts of climate processes or governance failures. Far-right and conspiracist actors combine delegitimisation (»system failure«, symbolic occupation or usurpation of authority (uniforms, self-styled »command centres«) and selective provision of aid to claim competence, which at the same time undermine public agencies and European citizens' trust in their authorities. External state and para-state media amplify these narratives in an attempt to portray Western governance as weak and divided.

Viewed in a comparative perspective, the instrumentalisation of climate disasters follows a logic of 'opportunity harvesting': crises are exploited to mobilise identity, punish opponents and erode public trust. Evidence from Germany, Spain, Italy, Greece and Poland shows that the effects are not merely rhetorical. When institutions are delegitimised during disasters, people are less likely to follow evacuation orders, and emergency workers face additional obstacles as they must fight rumours, as well as fires or floods. Blaming specific groups can also trigger unrest or violence, creating new victims in addition to those hit by the disaster itself. As extreme events become more frequent, the risk will grow that they will hinder rescue workers, as in the case of the Greek firefighters on Mount Penteli, and directly ignite unrest and destabilise democratic societies over the long term. Blaming the environmentalist »agenda« for catastrophic events itself leads to a broader delegitimising of European efforts to mitigate and adapt, as well as to the questioning of expertise in general, fuelling the spread of so-called »alternative facts«.



Residents of Valencia, Spain, survey the destruction left by the floods. (picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Alberto Saiz)

Disaster disinformation case study

A clear pattern has emerged from recent extreme weather events: far-right groups and hostile foreign information operatives exploit such crises to exacerbate social divisions and erode public trust in institutions. They thus create conditions in which both climate change itself and the need to address it are marginalised.

Spain

Denialist narratives and attacks on democratic institutions have seized on prolonged droughts and catastrophic floods in Spain. During a record drought in early 2023, disinformation entrepreneurs exploited a scientific article by the national meteorological agency (AEMET) on limited cloud-seeding experiments to claim that the government was »manipulating the weather«. Although the article stated clearly that such techniques operate only on a very small scale, its wording was distorted online to imply that Spain's drought was man-made. AEMET staff subsequently faced harassment campaigns, as meteorologists received waves of hostile messages and threats via social media, email and phone. Meanwhile, the Spanish Public Prosecutor's Office received hundreds of formal complaints from citizens who have swallowed the conspiracy theory.

During the 2024 floods in Valencia, a false narrative spread that the disaster had been caused by the demolition of »hundreds« of dams. Some blamed the Spanish government, while others blamed EU regulations or the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. [One X \(Twitter\) post claimed](#): »Spain destroyed more than 200 dams and river barriers in 2021 alone, leading the way in Eu-

rope's destruction of dams in order to »restore the natural course of rivers«, as dictated by Agenda 2030.' But remember: the recent floods are due to »climate change«. What clowns«. [Wide Awake Media](#), a major climate denialist account, with around 810,000 followers, [posted](#): »Spain destroyed more than 256 dams between 2021 and 2022 »to restore the natural course of rivers«, in order to comply with UN Agenda 2030. But no, the flooding is a result of »climate change«. The post amassed about 4.9 million views. GB News journalist and former Brexit Party MEP Alex Phillips [wrote on X](#): »EU made Spain remove dams. More than 200 people dead in horrific floods in Spain. They'll tell you a year's worth of rain fell. What they won't tell you is EU legislation forced Spain to rip out its dams. The EU's Biodiversity Strategy 2030 made Member States remove hindrances to »rewild« rivers. Guess who was top of the class? Spain. 133 taken out in 2023 alone«. According to [Maldita.es](#), at least 66 posts on X propagated this storyline. Several posts reached audiences in the millions, and collectively these posts have surpassed 28 million views. In reality, only a few obsolete river barriers and disused weirs have been removed under the EU Nature Restoration Regulation in recent years for safety or ecological restoration purposes. Furthermore, none of them were in areas affected by flooding.

Alongside the »dams« narrative, false claims that thousands had drowned in a flooded car park also circulated widely on TikTok. They were then taken up by, among others, the far-right party Vox. [Researchers at the Polytechnic University of Valencia and the International University of Valencia found](#) that three out of four hoaxes after the storm were deliberately fabricated. They de-

scribed the communication strategy as »diagonalism«, a coordinated effort to attack government institutions, scientific agencies, NGOs, and the media. The point is not to offer a coherent alternative explanation but to flood the information space with contradictory narratives that collectively erode institutional credibility.

Italy

A similar pattern could be observed after the floods in Italy's Emilia-Romagna region in 2023. The focus in this case was on scapegoating environmentalists. Conspiracy theories about dams and reservoirs were spread online, while senior officials and right-wing parties accused environmental movements of blocking flood-prevention works. Far-right parliamentarians claimed that prevention had not been carried out »because of environmentalist extremism«. Systemic underinvestment and climate-amplified risks were thus reframed as the fault of those who in fact had long warned about them. This hinders mitigation and deepens social division.

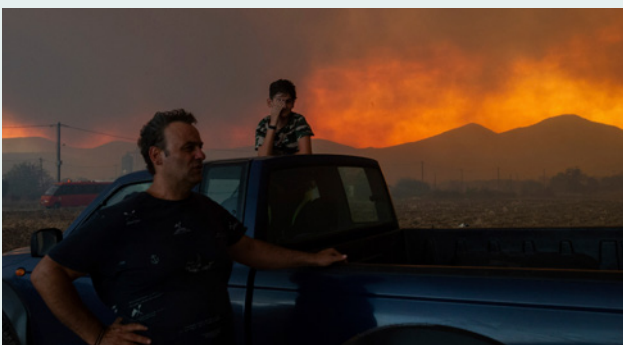
Poland

In Poland, major floods in 2023–2024 were exploited by disinformation networks with links to Russia. Within days, narratives about »hidden victims« and government cover-ups proliferated, and data showed a 300 per cent increase in coordinated online activity. Far-right politicians used the uncertainty to cast doubt on official death tolls and portray the government as dishonest.

Greece

During the 2023 Evros wildfires, unsubstantiated conspiracy theories [spread online](#), blaming refugees in the border region – a key entry point into the European Union for asylum seekers. A [video went viral](#) showing residents abducting refugees they accused of setting the fires and locking them in their trucks. In the footage, they urged locals to organise themselves and catch migrants before »they're going to burn us«, fueling [violence, harassment and vigilante patrols](#). Far-right MP Paris Papadakis of

Local residents watch the wildfire in the Evros region.
(AP Photo/Achilleas Chiras)



the Greek Solution party [declared](#) that »we are at war« because »illegal migrants specifically have set fires«. Later investigations found no evidence of arson by migrants; the fires were [most likely sparked by lightning and exacerbated by extreme heat, strong winds and dry vegetation](#). Nevertheless, the incident deepened xenophobic hostility in Greece and shifted the focus away from [structural failures in wildfire governance](#).

Germany

Following the floods in Germany's Ahr Valley in 2021, extreme right-wing groups such as the NPD and conspiracy networks exploited volunteer and aid channels to promote the idea of a »system failure« while presenting themselves as the real rescuers. [Vehicles imitating police units](#) issued false announcements that emergency services were being withdrawn, even while responders were still operating, seeking to make residents believe that the state had abandoned them. One group set up a make-shift »command centre« in a local school, with some of them wearing official Bundeswehr uniforms. The group »Eltern stehen auf« (Parents rise up) – associated with the »Querdenker« (»lateral thinkers«) movement – opened an official-sounding children's care centre and implied that it had an official mandate. When the district administration publicly distanced itself from this in a [Facebook statement](#), it faced a social media backlash for not »letting helpers finally do their job« because »without the volunteer helpers, nothing would work«.

A van made to look like a police car drives near the Ahr Valley disaster zone.
(picture alliance/dpa | Thomas Frey)



[State security reports](#) also note that state-linked Russian and Chinese actors used social media to influence the narrative surrounding the floods, amplifying the »system failure« narrative and related disinformation. Building on this, state-sponsored [Chinese media outlets](#) presented the episode as »proof« that »Western governance is failing«. The claim was that significant crises necessitate a robust central government and that Western societies and their »decentralisation« model are fundamentally weak, citing the Ahr Valley floods as a case in point.

Conclusion

European policymakers have often been guilty, due to complacency, arrogance, insufficient capacity or a simple lack of imagination, of overlooking novel threats. Such threats are something that happens somewhere else and their severity is »unproven«. But even if they are broadly accepted, they can come to be perceived as insufficiently urgent to justify attention among so many other crises and demands on time and resources. As a consequence, it's sometimes only when these dangers have already become entrenched and may have escalated to the point of undeniability that they're apt to be taken seriously. When it comes to climate the European continent risks repeating past mistakes, but this time with even more severe consequences.

The bad news, as illustrated throughout *A Distant Problem No Longer*, is that the danger is already upon us and that, if significant action is not taken, it may worsen significantly. A certain amount of additional warming appears baked in, and so, by extension perhaps, is a greater degree of climate-related instability and even chaos, both at home and abroad. As alluded to among the recommendations, policymakers must prepare their populations for a future that is likely to be more volatile, however well – or not – they may govern.

But there's also a – potentially substantial – silver lining. The very fact that climate-related instability is intimately connected to so many of Europe's other problems means that it need not, and indeed cannot and should not, be tackled in isolation. The solutions to climate security risks include broader political reforms, such as reducing inequalities, improving institutional performance and renewing infrastructure, most of which would be desperately needed even in a world without climate change. If climate's security hazards can help to inject some urgency into those measures, then perhaps some good can come from them. Economic competitiveness, resilient democracies and physical security are different aspects of the same thing.

More than that, and perhaps most hearteningly, most, if not all of the worst climate conflict outcomes remain within European decisionmakers' capacity to quash. Our recommendations chart at least part of the path to a less chaotic future. It's incumbent on officials to grasp the perils of inaction, and to act with the appropriate tenacity, swiftness and care.

Recommendations

Attempting to come up with recommendations can sometimes feel like a fool's errand. Frequently, solutions to problems are already known, but not implemented because they require short-term political pain when an election may be looming. Sometimes the political will is there, but the budget for – often expensive – measures is not. In putting together these suggestions, we have tried to strike a balance between what is necessary and what is politically and economically feasible.

1. Plan

More awareness-raising about climate's contribution to violence at home and abroad.

Talk of awareness-raising can feel woefully insufficient in the face of events that cry out for action. But precisely because so much of this challenge hinges on summoning up the political will to deploy known solutions, heightened public awareness is vital. Discussion of the problems should go hand in hand with superior communication of the solutions in order to prevent the appearance of »doom-mongering« – and the public paralysis that can result from it.

Tap Europe's wealth of climate security expertise to expand research.

Although global climate security research largely comes from or is funded by European institutions, too few of the relevant knowledgeable individuals or centres have been consulted by national or subnational authorities within the continent. We must avail ourselves of – and better fund – these institutions, many of which are already struggling with acute budget crunches. As things stand, a number of them are cutting, rather than adding to, personnel and programming.

This is particularly problematic for at least two reasons. In the short term, these European institutions will need to shoulder much of the shortfall left by the Trump administration's cuts in funding for all things climate-related. But they'll also be needed to spearhead the expanded research on climate security risks in Europe that is so urgently required. As briefly discussed in the structure and approach box, this is much easier said than done in relation to a form of insecurity that is often impervious to quantitative data collection methods. But secure more hard data we must.

Ensure that all European countries have conducted national climate-related security risk assessments.

All Western and Northern European states have incorporated at least some climate security considerations into their government programming. It's a much more mixed picture

among the most vulnerable southeastern European states, many of which make no more than *indirect or veiled references* to these risks. Here too, expertise from elsewhere on the continent could help to address these omissions.

More education of the authorities who are worst-placed to address climate-related instability, but most likely to encounter it.

As highlighted in Part 2, places that have seldom experienced water shortages in the past may be extra poorly equipped to manage future water crises safely and calmly. Consequently, energetic efforts will be required to educate and inform officials who are new to this challenge, especially at the local and regional levels.

More broadly speaking, governments at every level must bolster their understanding of where the most severe climate-related security risks lie, and deploy resources with those vulnerabilities in mind. For example, rural areas frequently require additional resources in the immediate – and distant – aftermaths of extreme weather events.

More awareness-building among rural law enforcement.

Given how disproportionately vulnerable rural areas are to climate-related instability, the police and others charged with keeping the peace in these communities must be equipped with the capabilities they need to manage greater risks. Much of this, too, begins with education. By illuminating the causal pathways between extreme weather events and various forms of crime, officers can begin to better tackle climate-related lawbreaking.

2. Coordinate

Return climate security to the EU parliamentary agenda.

Since 2022, the policy momentum of climate security in Europe has flagged badly. The energy and resources have been redirected to combat the threat from Moscow. Renewed efforts to tackle the issue could illustrate climate's impact on Europe itself, with a particular focus on the eroding social fabric and the manifold fallout for rural – generally politically conservative – constituencies.

Enhance climate security cooperation within and beyond Europe's borders.

Climate security expertise is best shared, especially at a time of global budget challenges. The EU and the United Kingdom's recent *security and defence agreement*, which includes a significant climate security component, could serve as a template for cooperation elsewhere. Looking south, European researchers and institutions have much to share with and learn from partners in countries most affected by the impacts of climate change, not least because of the greater intensity of climate change's effects on insecurity in these regions.

Within the EU, attempt to break down silos between the centres of understanding and the »implementers«.

The EU itself possesses considerable climate security expertise. However, relatively little of it appears to lie within the parts of the organisation responsible for directly or indirectly implementing solutions to climate-related insecurity. Branches such as the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG Agri) must have better links to the EU's knowledge base.

Expand and better coordinate the EU's disaster response mechanisms.

As we have highlighted throughout this report, climate change is apt to fuel divisions between Europeans at a local, regional and national levels. As a consequence, heightened intra-European solidarity will be crucial to balance out destabilising factors and actors. Existing EU strategies, such as the RescEU programme, point the way to how the Union could go about that. By deploying different countries' firefighters to wildfire-afflicted parts of Europe, policymakers have assisted states during periods of acute difficulty, thereby reinforcing empathy and a sense of kinship across the continent.

This kind of cooperation is likely to become all the more important as extreme weather events overwhelm national capabilities and reduce Member State governments' fiscal capacity to reinforce their own response agencies. As a number of US politicians said in their defence of FEMA, the US federal disaster response agency, »most states don't have disasters every year. The United States does.« The same goes for Europe.

3. Act

Bolster climate adaptation measures, with a particular emphasis on vulnerable communities.

Without targeted assistance in various forms, many rural areas will sink deeper into difficulties as climate impacts surge. The heavily agricultural character of much of rural Europe, combined in many instances with periods of extended under-investment, has left these areas uniquely poorly placed to handle climate stress of any kind. While adaptation is costly and will be required across the continent, there must be a recognition that these sparsely populated and often economically »unimportant« communities cannot be left behind. Adaptation at home and abroad is a security imperative.

Seek out more environment and defence »win/wins«.

Historically, environmental protection and defence have been seen as somehow in opposition. And while that perception has lost some of its potency in recent years, spending on one of these two priorities still frequently comes at the detriment of the other. Proposals to »re-wet« some of

Eastern and Northern Europe's degraded marshlands as a means of slowing a potential Russian advance illustrates how these issues can go together.

Actively assist in the renewal of rural institutions.

Out-migration to cities has contributed to the collapse or degradation of many of the formal or ad hoc institutions that, in one way or another, help to keep the peace in rural areas. Without these bodies, rural areas are more vulnerable – and perhaps also more prone – to criminal activity. In these contexts, tensions over water and other issues are less likely to end in peaceful outcomes. It is incumbent on national governments to invest in the institutions that can maintain local governance, social cohesion and peaceful dispute resolution, especially given the likelihood of continuing agricultural decline.

Do no harm.

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been blamed for a lot of things, whether fairly or not. However, NGOs suggest it does have a case to answer for here. Some CAP subsidies have allegedly been used to fund **illegal boreholes** and other forms of irrigation in the past. There may be a limit to authorities' ability to temper climate-related instability in all scenarios, so at the very least they must ensure that they're not actively exacerbating the problems.

Engage in climate/conflict-sensitive infrastructure renewal.

The more the world warms, the more Europe will be forced to refurbish its infrastructure. For example, many of the continent's cities will have no choice but to turn to surrounding rural areas to expand their water supply, as discussed in Part 2. But in doing so, they risk exacerbating already tense rural-urban relations. National and urban authorities must grasp these trade-offs, and ensure the buy-in of the communities at origin. Without that, rural-to-urban water transfer schemes are liable to spark significantly more future discontent than we've experienced to date.

Better prepare and deploy anti-misinformation and anti-disinformation efforts.

Extreme weather events are ripe for exploitation by malign actors. As climate shocks strike with greater regularity and intensity over the coming years, Europe must equip itself with the skills and capabilities it needs to recognise and counter »fake news« campaigns emanating both from within the continent and beyond. Much of this work will be required ahead of time, ensuring that the relevant agencies are empowered and sufficiently well funded to coordinate and act with the requisite speed.

Psychologically prepare Europe's citizenry for tougher times to come.

Even European countries with a strong state capacity are likely to struggle to fully insulate their populations from certain climate-related blows and falling living standards. By being upfront about the risks, officials can better prepare citizens for future turmoil, perhaps even reduce the degree of popular anti-state blowback when – or if – extended crises strike. Above all they may be able to enlist more people in formulating solutions. As part of these preparations, citizens could actively engage in contingency planning, among other contributions.

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