Ten issues to watch in 2024

European Parliament

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

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This EPRS publication seeks to put into context and offer insights on 10 key issues and policy areas that have the potential to feature prominently in public debate and on the political agenda of the European Union in 2024. It has been coordinated and edited by Isabelle Gaudeul-Ehrhart of the Members' Research Service, based on contributions from the following policy analysts: Antonio Albaladejo Román (El Niño's knock on effect on food security), Alessandro D'Alfonso (Time to accelerate delivery on the twin transition), Micaela Del Monte (Young Europeans go to the polls), Angelos Delivorias (India's rise: Ready to be a great power?), Gisela Grieger (The 2024 US elections: A watershed moment?), Silvia Kotanidis (Prosecution of international core crimes and reparation for victims in Russia's war on Ukraine), Henrique Morgado Simoes (Climate overshoot and adaptation), Mar Negreiro (How to counter fake reality and disinformation in a year of elections), Tim Peters (Financing Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction) and Guillaume Ragonnaud (The future of the EU automotive sector). The cover image and other graphics were produced by Samy Chahri.

Further details of the progress of on-going EU legislative proposals, including all those mentioned in this paper, are available in the European Parliament's Legislative Train Schedule, at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/.

Table of contents

Figure 1 – Selected events that will contribute to shaping the year 2024

15 January
Republican primaries
start in the US

3 February
Democratic primaries
start in the US

8-9 February
Climate Chance
Summit on
adaptation

By 20 February
mid-term
evaluation of the
Recovery and
Resilience
Facility

Young Europeans and the European elections
Fake reality and disinformation in a year of elections
Delivery on the twin transition
Climate overshoot and adaptation
The future of the EU automotive sector
Financing Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction
International core crimes and reparation for victims in Ukraine
El Niño's knock-on effect on food security
The 2024 US elections
India's rise

November*
COP29

1-30 October
10th European
Conference
on Sustainable Cities
and Towns

16-19 July
First plenary session
of the 10th parliamentary term

Before summer*
Third Forum – Mission
on Adaptation to Climate Change

2 July
Start of the European Parliament's
10th term

27-28 June
European Council meeting

June*
European Urban
Resilience Forum

6-9 June
European Elections

April-May
Indian general election

April-May
El Niño conditions expected to recede

JAN 2025
DEC
NOV
OCT
SEP
AUG
JUL
JUN
MAY
APR
MAR
FEB
JAN

2024

*Selected events due to take place in 2024.

Source: EPRS, 2024.

Introduction

The eighth edition of this annual publication comes in a year in which the European political cycle comes full circle. Just 150 days after the launch of this paper, the results of the European elections will shape the European Parliament for the five years to come. The Parliament, which has launched an ambitious reform project to modernise and strengthen itself, will be ready for this new term, not least to elect the President of the European Commission and then deliver a vote of consent on the full college of Commissioners.

In this electoral year, it is fitting to look back before we look ahead. The issues we identified on the eve of the previous European elections – in 2019 – were the institutional changes following citizens' votes, a changing world both climate-wise and in international relations, and the impact of the digital transformation on technologies, the economy and the social fabric of society. These issues were not only confirmed as being critical; they have accelerated over the past five years. The climate has seen ever more extremes and the issue of climate change become more urgent, as we each experience in daily life and as science has confirmed, most recently at the December 2023 COP28 climate change conference in Dubai. New wars and fronts have raged across the globe, from Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Europe's eastern flank, to Azerbaijan's attack and recapture of the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh, to the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Middle East. And at home, the digital transition is affecting more and more aspects of our daily lives.

To understand this uncertain and volatile world, this year again, the European Parliamentary Research Service has asked ten of its policy analysts to explain the latest developments in their respective areas. When it comes to selecting just ten issues, there has never been a lack of material. And certainly not this year. Our aim is to shine the spotlight on just a few issues which will be crucial in the year 2024, as highlighted in the timeline in Figure 1. Some will make the headlines, whereas others may get less publicity but nonetheless be critical in the legislative or budgetary agenda of the Union, and contribute to changing our lives and society over time.

This publication covers climate and also broadens the view to El Niño. It deals with the green and digital transition and zooms in on the automotive industry. It focuses on the United States elections as well as on its would-be challenger, India. It addresses both Ukraine's reconstruction and the legal response to the aggression: prosecution of international core crimes and reparation for victims. And of course, in a year of elections, it looks at this major democratic exercise, involving hundreds of millions of citizens on our own continent, with a specific eye for young voters and fake reality and online misinformation.

Readers will find our analysis on other issues in previous editions of this publication (listed under the 'Further reading section') and in the thousands of publications EPRS has issued online and in paper over the years, to enrich the knowledge environment of the Parliament.

We hope that you will enjoy reading this latest edition of 'Ten Issues to Watch' and that it will stimulate your own reflection and ignite your curiosity as you explore the challenges and opportunities of 2024.

Étienne Bassot

Director, Members' Research Service,
European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)

1. Young Europeans go to the polls

From 6 to 9 June 2024, more than 365 million EU citizens in the 27 Member States will be called to the ballot box for the 10th European elections. European elections represent a crucial moment in our continental democracy: they give EU citizens a say in the political direction of the European Union. After declining ever since the first European direct elections in 1979, electoral turnout increased in the 2019 elections to reach **50.6 %** (an additional 8 percentage points compared to 2014) largely **due to youth participation**, according to a post-election Eurobarometer survey. Youth participation in the 2019 elections was a success that some consider, at least partially, the result of the European Parliament's promotion campaign 'This Time I am Voting' and the Snapchat account. The former gathered together more than 300 000 people who actively promoted the European elections, while the latter aimed at generating engagement as well as promoting better understanding of the issues of most interest to young Europeans. Interest in the European elections is higher one year out than it was at the same point before the previous European elections (56 % in Spring 2023 in contrast to 50 % in Spring 2018). Moreover, 67 % of EU citizens declared that they are likely to vote, in contrast to 58 % in 2018.

Echoing the 2019 motto 'This time I'm voting', the 2024 one might be: 'I did it again!' The 2024 European elections could be a turning point for youth engagement for several reasons.

Firstly, four Member States (Belgium, Germany, Malta and Austria) will allow **16-year-olds to vote at the 2024 European elections, and Greece will allow 17-year-olds**. Germany changed its electoral law in 2023, Belgium in 2022 and Malta in 2018. The voting age was lowered in Austria from 18 to 16 years as part of the 2007 electoral law reform. Parliament has expressed the idea that a single harmonised age for voting would ensure equality and avoid discrimination. In May 2022, for instance, it tabled a legislative initiative proposing to set at 16 the voting age for European elections, while allowing for exceptions. Moreover, in September 2023, Parliament gave its consent to adjust the distribution of seats among Member States, allocating a total of 15 additional seats (720 seats in total) in order to take into consideration demographic changes since 2019. A number of studies have underlined the benefit of lowering the voting age, not only in terms of immediate impact on turnout but also in order to encourage the development of a lifelong habit of voting, especially if young people have first voted while still living with their parents. This positive effect increases when voters had attended civic education classes at school. Also young voters would have a 'trickle up' effect on their parents' voting behaviour because parents will be more likely to vote as well in order to set an example and boost their children's civic engagement.

Secondly, there is a **strong political will** to engage with young people. The Presidents of both the European Parliament and the European Commission have made it clear that the EU institutions will listen to and address the concerns of younger generations. In June 2023, on the occasion of the European Youth Event, Roberta Metsola invited the young crowd to take an active role in shaping the European project, and 'not retreat to the comfort of easy cynicism or indifference'. Previously in 2021, following a formal Commission proposal to make 2022 the European Year of Youth, Ursula von der Leyen had declared that 'A Union is stronger if it embraces the aspirations of our young people – grounded in values and bold in action'. Parliament itself, in September 2023, in its resolution on Parliamentarism, European citizenship and democracy, stressed once again the importance of youth participation in the democratic life of the Union and proposed the creation of a European agora, a structured participation mechanism that would discuss the EU's priorities and provide input to the consultation process on the Commission's annual work programme (CWP). This strong will was also clearly expressed during the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Joint Declaration on the Conference signed by the Presidents of the European Parliament, Council and Commission, expressly recognised the contribution of 'young Europeans playing a central role in shaping the future of the European project'. In 2020, Parliament proposed the creation of two 'youth

agoras', to provide young people with their own forum. This proposal was not retained however. It is noteworthy that a third of the 800 citizens randomly selected as participants in the conference were between 16 and 25 years old. The result of this exercise in participatory democracy was a set of around 200 citizens' recommendations, many of which suggested **strengthening youth engagement** in the democratic process (see in particular panel 1 and panel 2). Among the 326 final measures issued by the Conference, some proposed to organise citizens' panels with children (e.g. 10 to 16 year olds) in schools; introduce EU citizenship education in schools and develop an EU 'Youth Test'. Other measures concerned European elections, to lower the voting age to 16 and request national parties to ensure that younger candidates are included on their lists for the European elections.

Thirdly, contrary to conventional wisdom, which often claims that young people are disengaged from politics, they seem to take advantage of the new opportunities offered, notably by social media, to inform themselves, engage and take the future 'in their own hands'. As confirmed by a 2023 Parliament study, there is a growing body of data suggesting that young people have not withdrawn from politics, but engage in various forms. A 2015 Commission study found that 42 % of young people (aged between 16 and 24) declared an interest in politics. Some 70 % of those eligible to vote went to the polls in their last national elections, and they considered that **the prime form of political action is voting**. This was confirmed in a 2020 survey on the Future of Europe. Similarly, a 2021 Parliament Youth survey reported that 87 % of the people consulted engaged in at least one political or civic activity. European democracy is much more than voting; it is also about civic engagement and participation in the democratic processes. Over the years and especially among young people, political participation has evolved. Young Europeans are far from being apolitical, therefore not only youth participation in elections could make a difference but other forms of **unconventional political activism are surging online** (such as mass tweets, email campaigns) as well as **on the streets of our cities** (e.g. grassroots activism, petitions and school strikes). These activities are compatible with and do not exclude more traditional forms of engagement.

Fourthly, young people are engaged and have **expectations**. A 2021 Youth survey found that a majority of young people discuss politics with friends and relatives, voted in the most recent elections, have signed or created a petition and taken part in a demonstration. Nevertheless, a majority of respondents feel that decision-makers do not pay much attention to them, as confirmed by a 2022 Flash Eurobarometer. The most common expectation was that decision-makers listen more to young people's opinions and needs, while more efforts should be made to better integrate young people in the job market and include disadvantaged young people; also young people should take up learning opportunities and engage directly with politicians. Youth political priorities are clear: preserving peace and security, increasing job opportunities, fighting poverty and climate change, and promoting EU values, democracy and human rights. The good news is that they consider that the EU can address their concerns and has an impact on their daily lives. Respondents were particularly satisfied with the EU's action to support Ukraine and to uphold democratic rights and the rule of law.

To conclude, there is clearly a **range of opportunities** for political actors to engage with young people ahead of the European elections. Some suggest stressing the role of political parties in promoting the issues that are of particular concern for young people; involving young people in the elaboration of parties' manifestos; elaborating separate party manifestos specifically addressed to young voters; promoting young candidates, as well as civic training and education in EU-related matters in schools around the EU. Inviting young people to participate in politics and informing them about their civic rights would empower them and help address disengagement and disillusionment with politics. Other possibilities include introducing alternative voting methods such as on-line or postal voting. The possibility to vote from anywhere via the internet would be particularly attractive to 'tech-savvy (younger) generations'. Finally, others suggest improving the accessibility of the ballot box so as to better include young people with disabilities.

2. How to counter fake reality and disinformation in a year of elections
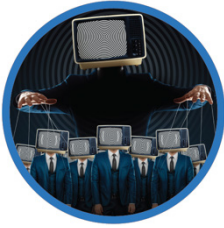
The year 2024 will be marked by a series of elections in the EU and worldwide: Over 60 major elections are scheduled, including in large countries such as India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Korea, Taiwan, and the US, and in the EU, among others, Belgium, Ireland, Croatia, Austria, Romania and Finland. Moreover there will also be the European Parliament elections in June (see also issue 1). These elections are likely to be negatively impacted by online disinformation which continues to be spread on social media platforms. Disinformation was already a concern in previous elections through, among other things, the influence of manipulative actors such as bots, unlawful microtargeting and fake accounts. Conversely voters are increasingly influenced by social media news. It is therefore important to consider the rise in generative artificial intelligence (AI), a broad field that encompasses AI models that power chatbots and other AI tools to generate texts, videos and images such as deepfakes. These AI tools are advancing at startling speeds. While some consider that generative AI may help optimise and improve production and targeting of political ads, others warn that it is bringing disruption to political life and democracy, posing new risks to tackle.

Generative AI technology is a fast-moving target

As the digital transformation continues in politics as in other sectors, technological advances such as generative AI have brought new and powerful methods for creating and conveying disinformation. For instance, ChatGPT, which was released in November 2022, is considered the fastest application to reach 100 million active users. A report published in 2023 shows how users can produce and distribute false or propaganda content in an easy, accessible and affordable way. This is also the case for deepfakes: in 2023 over 500 000 video and voice deepfakes were shared on social media around the world. Thus the rise of deepfake crime is a significant concern for the years to come. According to Europol, 90 % of online content may be generated synthetically by 2026. Moreover Internet traffic is increasingly driven by fake traffic. For instance, bots made up nearly half of all internet traffic in 2022. The European cybersecurity agency, ENISA, identified three ways hackers were abusing AI to trick people: first, using the technology to craft convincing phishing emails and messages that resemble legitimate sources; second, creating voice deepfakes; and third, using AI to mine data for malicious purposes.

While concerns about AI's impacts on the democratic process are not new, voters on both sides of the Atlantic are getting more and more concerned: surveys show that a majority of US adults are concerned that AI could increase the spread of false information during the 2024 presidential election – those more familiar with AI tools being more likely to believe so – and a majority of EU citizens in some Member States are concerned about the threats that AI and deepfake technology pose, making it difficult for voters to distinguish the real from the fake.

According to some, synthetic propaganda and deepfakes are capable of distorting our perception of reality in a more fundamental way as, for example, they are more likely to be rated attractive and credible and to be shared by users. Not only are deepfakes already appearing in connection to political candidates (they were used in the recent election campaigns in Slovakia and Poland), but they are also increasingly used to target key institutions such as established journals. For instance, generative AI could have a negative impact on voter turnout, through 'rumour bombing' to deter voters from going to vote, or on 'swing voters' who make up their minds at the last minute, as AI enables far more precise audience targeting. Although the use of generative AI in political ads has been limited thus far, many anticipate increased usage in the 2024 and beyond. Thus some big tech companies have updated their policies to ban or to require political ads on their platforms to disclose if they were created using generative AI.

Reliably detecting generative AI content proves very difficult (for both machines and human beings)

Unlike with previous disinformation methods, a consensus is emerging that reliably detecting generative AI content presents serious technical challenges for automated detection. This will grow in severity as the technology matures. This is partly due to the fact that the same technology is being used both to detect and to produce generative AI content. According to some, supply side disclosure is part of the solution. Labelling AI-generated content with a watermark could help users better judge the content they are seeing. At the same time all content should have one, so as not to create confusion among users and support fake content without a label. Researchers have shown that every single watermarking technique is vulnerable to exploitation and evasion, and it is easy to add fake watermarks to real images, creating even more confusion. 2023 research shows how users struggled to distinguish between deepfakes and authentic videos, being wrong over one third of the time. Moreover the reduction of human content moderators on major social media platforms, in many instances replaced by AI moderators, is playing a role in the spread of deepfakes and more broadly disinformation and misinformation.

Yet a majority of citizens in many countries like the US increasingly get their news from social media. Moreover, Facebook reportedly dedicates only 13 % of its content-moderation budget to consumers outside the US. And in encrypted applications (such as WhatsApp), manipulative content goes undetected as there are no moderators. Generations of potential voters might be exposed to false online content, so citizens must have the knowledge to assess its veracity. Many believe that the solution lies in better media literacy to help users better debunk and assess generative AI content, but it is not an easy task to distinguish fake content from real. Even computer science students at a university were unable to sort out deepfakes from authentic videos more than 20 % of the time. In other research, teenage students outperformed adults, including their educators. Thus there might be a generational digital divide emerging that needs to be bridged. Young people are generally more prone to use generative AI than adults. A survey found that a majority of US teenagers reported knowing ChatGPT. Other surveys also suggest teenagers are using it more than their parents and educators, often hiding it from them. Yet children are particularly vulnerable as their cognitive capacities are still developing, so new guidance and regulation may be needed.

A global response is yet to come

The technological race between China and the US is also affecting generative AI. China has put forward the first legal requirements for AI companies to submit security assessments and other tests to be approved before releasing AI products in China. It is meant to control the spread of content against the regime but has not stopped deepfakes against the US, and likewise China is expected to use generative AI to influence the 2024 Taiwanese elections. The US so far has led a soft approach, with President Biden's executive order looking to boost innovation, among other things with new standards to be set up and to support AI specialists' immigration. This follows the ongoing G7 Hiroshima AI Process and global discussions in the United Nations (UN) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The EU adopted the Digital Services Act (DSA) to fight disinformation dissemination among other things. DSA implementation in 2024 should bring new measures to mitigate risks and fight disinformation, for instance against Russian malign activities. The EU has also reached an agreement on the AI Act. At the time of publishing, its technical details were being finalised; they will define if it takes a harder or a softer stance on generative AI.

The first-ever AI security summit has concluded that we need more intelligence about the intelligence we have just created and announced a number of related actions and the need for a global response.

Given all these facts and while we wait for the legislation to be put in place it would be worth asking what else could be done in 2024 on the demand and supply side to counter online fake reality.

3. Time to accelerate delivery on the twin transition

Next Generation EU (NGEU) and its centrepiece for investment, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), are the main EU funding instruments for green and digital measures. Against the backdrop of huge investment needs in these strategic policy areas, 2024 marks a crucial phase in NGEU implementation.

The twin transition

The EU and its Member States have identified the twin transition towards a greener and digital society as the key objective of the decade. Both policy areas are crucial to ensure resilient economies and societies, which are able to thrive through sustainable and inclusive growth. Europe is greatly exposed to the major challenges posed by climate change (see issues 4 and 8), since it has been warming twice as much as the global average since the 1980s. Climate-related risks are multiple, with increasingly visible examples such as extreme weather events and negative implications for different aspects of daily life, from economic activities to health. In one of the main sectors affected by the green transition (energy), Russia's war on Ukraine has further accelerated the need for the EU to step up efforts to decarbonise its sources. At the same time, economies and societies across the world are digitalising their activities at a rapid pace. In the context of growing uncertainties linked to the global and security outlook, digital skills, infrastructure and services are essential ingredients of industrial competitiveness, job creation and resilience if high-risk dependencies in strategic sectors are to be avoided. Not least, digital solutions can contribute to green objectives but have their own carbon footprint that needs to be addressed, showing the close and complex interlinkages of the twin transition. The von der Leyden Commission has been promoting a wide range of legislative and non-legislative initiatives in both areas, in the framework of the European Green Deal and Europe's digital decade. In the EU, delivering the twin transition implies massive additional investment needs, estimated yearly at €522 billion for green objectives and €125 billion for the digital transformation up to 2030. While the bulk of financing is expected to come from the private sector, public investment has a major role to play, including as a catalyst for private funding.

The role of the Next Generation EU recovery instrument

The largest source of EU funding for the twin transition is by far NGEU, the €806.9 billion instrument that the EU created to help Member States recover from the socio-economic impact of the pandemic. Financed through borrowing, most of NGEU's resources are channelled through the national recovery and resilience plans (NRRPs) that Member States implement under the RRF. Thanks to compulsory expenditure targets to be met in each plan for both policy areas, the RRF alone is projected to devote €202.8 billion to climate-related measures (35.1 % of the 2021-2027 EU budget's climate contribution) and €130 billion to digital objectives (or around 70 % of EU budget expenditure contributing directly to the EU digital decade over the same timespan).

The RRF annual report of September 2023 shows that NRRPs support a wide range of investment and reform measures that can contribute to addressing green and digital objectives. Under the green transition pillar, significant resources are devoted to sustainable mobility (€79.4 billion), energy efficiency (€72.8 billion), and clean power (€35.3 billion). The revision of the plans that followed (see below) has further reinforced their energy dimension through the inclusion of new REPowerEU chapters. Examples of green measures planned by the Member States are the modernisation of railway infrastructure, support to the energy-efficient renovation of residential and public buildings, and development of renewables and energy networks. The digital policy areas receiving the highest support are e-government and digital public services (€53 billion), human capital (€20 billion), and digitalisation of businesses (€19 billion). Relevant measures include projects to ensure the interoperability of digital public platforms, the deployment of electronic

identification schemes (eID), investment to increase the digital skills of the general population and the workforce, and integration of advanced digital technologies in firms' production processes. Importantly, under both the green and digital pillars, investment measures are often coupled with reforms that should increase the benefits of the former, for instance by creating a stable regulatory environment for renewables, and creating the foundations of a digital business environment.

Why 2024 is important for delivery and scrutiny

In May 2023, as part of the European Semester, the Commission concluded that the deployment of the RRF was broadly on track, but variations across the EU were emerging. In September 2023, the Commission reported that RRF payments to Member States amounted to €153.4 billion in total thus far, of which €17.3 billion was for the green transition and €8.9 billion for the digital transformation. In the second half of 2023, emissions of NGEU bonds were significantly lower than in the first, suggesting that the revision of the NRRPs to include REPowerEU chapters and address unexpected challenges such as high inflation may have contributed to slowing down their implementation. As of 8 January 2024, Member States had met 15 % of the objectives under the green transition pillar and 13 % of those under the digital transformation pillar. Results already delivered include 17.8 million additional dwellings provided with internet access via very high capacity networks (e.g. in Austria, France and Italy) and savings in annual primary energy consumption worth 22.1 million MWh (e.g. in Czechia, Greece and Portugal). At the same time, various milestones and targets achieved were only the first steps in the implementation of broader measures.

In 2024, NGEU and the RRF enter the second half of their lifecycle. Given the temporary nature of these instruments, all the measures they finance must be completed by 2026. The fact that Member States still have to meet 86 % of the NRRPs' objectives linked to the twin transition means that it will be important for RRF implementation to regain momentum, now that the revision of most plans has been finalised. In the course of the year, hundreds of milestones and targets are scheduled to be completed for investment and reform measures that have the potential to advance the twin transition, bringing concrete benefits for citizens and businesses across the EU. Expected results include: the entry into force of legislation streamlining procedures for wind energy projects in Estonia (as part of REPowerEU), the completion of the energy-efficient renovation of at least 160 000 residential dwellings in Spain, the operationalisation of the central safety system of the European Rail Traffic Management System in the Netherlands, and the provision of high-speed internet connections to an additional 204 education institutions with around 35 000 pupils in Slovenia (i.e. 18 % of relevant establishments in the country).

Taking into account the huge investment needs for the twin transition, the building up of delays in the implementation of RRF measures should be avoided since these could easily lead to the loss of resources, because of the time limits applicable to NGEU and the RRF. Full use of such resources is all the more relevant now given that the RRF is projected to be a key driver of public investment in the EU in times of tighter monetary policy, limited fiscal space of Member States, and renewed application of EU fiscal rules as of 2024. While the RRF is not large enough to cover all the investment needs linked to green and digital objectives, various analyses concur that it is a very good opportunity to address part of those, including through its reform component.

Finally, proper scrutiny of implementation is crucial to ensure the effective use of resources and promptly correct possible weaknesses. In that respect, the Commission is to provide the European Parliament and the Council with an independent evaluation report on the implementation of the RRF by 20 February 2024. The Parliament holds the Commission politically accountable for the implementation of the RRF through the discharge procedure (vote expected in April 2024), while monitoring the delivery of results, including through regular dialogue with the executive. Lessons learnt from NGEU and the RRF will feed the debate on how to keep financing the common objectives of the twin transition after these temporary instruments come to a close at the end of 2026.

4. Climate overshoot and adaptation

The world is not on track to keep the global temperature rise below 2°C. Even under the most optimistic scenarios, the temperature rise is expected to overshoot 1.5°C for a while, before falling back below 1.5°C thanks to large-scale carbon removals. While action to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and scale up carbon dioxide removal remains crucial, there is an urgent need to reinforce efforts to adapt to climate change, in order to avoid losses and build resilience.

Climate overshoot is likely

Average global temperatures have risen significantly since the industrial revolution. The last decade was the warmest on record, with global warming around 1.13 to 1.17°C. In Europe, average temperatures have risen even more – between 2.04 and 2.10°C above pre-industrial levels. In September and October 2023, the global average temperature rise exceeded 1.5°C, driven by greenhouse gases in combination with El Niño, a recurring period of unusually warm water in the Pacific Ocean (see issue 8). In November 2023, the global temperature rise briefly reached 2°C.

The Paris Agreement sets a target to keep the global temperature increase to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, with efforts to keep warming to 1.5°C. The remaining carbon budget for staying below 1.5°C is estimated as equal to five years of current GHG emissions, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stresses that temporary overshoot is 'almost inevitable'.

Climate overshoot means exceeding a temperature threshold, usually 1.5°C, for a while before temperatures fall back below the threshold. For temperatures to fall again, rapid and deep cuts to GHG emissions are needed, followed by very large-scale carbon dioxide removal, using technology (direct air capture with carbon storage) and natural solutions such as forests.

However, projections show that even if all national climate pledges are implemented, temperatures would continue to rise by 2.5°C to 2.9°C above pre-industrial levels. While a rapid phase-out of fossil fuel emissions would be needed to limit warming to 1.5°C, governments plan to produce around 110 % more fossil fuels in 2030 than would be consistent with that target.

Impacts of climate overshoot

We are already seeing more frequent and more severe impacts and economic losses associated with climate change. Impacts include extreme weather events, shrinking ice sheets and Arctic sea ice, retreating glaciers, warmer oceans, rising sea levels and ocean acidification. The greatest warming is expected in north-eastern Europe, northern Scandinavia and inland areas of the Mediterranean Member States.

Climate overshoot will lead to more climate variability and extreme events. Its impacts depend on the magnitude of temperature rise and its duration, and would best be addressed at the local level. The Climate Overshoot Commission highlights several categories of impact. These include **extreme weather events**, such as severe storms, heavy rainfall, droughts, forest fires, coastal flooding and heatwaves. **Heat** is described as 'the most direct and significant' because of its impact on health, agriculture and energy systems. There is a strong link between **public health** and climate change, and overshooting would have negative impacts on disease transmission, malnutrition, mental stress and air pollution. **Natural ecosystems**, already struggling with current temperatures, would be further threatened. Finally, the report highlights existing tipping points, such as the West Antarctic ice sheet, which, if crossed, could lead to **irreversible and catastrophic changes**. Risks may still increase due to the compounding and cascading nature of climate-related impacts. While net emissions reductions (mitigation) help to avoid or limit the overshoot, stronger adaptation measures are urgently needed to cope with a changed climate and avoid losses and damage.

Adaptation reduces climate-related loss and damage

Adaptation is a process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects, in order to reduce risks, avoid harm or exploit beneficial opportunities. Climate risks increase with every rise in global temperature, even if by only a fraction of a degree. Therefore, mitigation also lowers the cost of adaptation. Adaptation has limits: beyond a certain temperature rise, some adaptation measures will lose their effectiveness, for example when sea level rise renders flood defences ineffective. Nature-based solutions, such as urban green corridors, have a high potential for reducing risks from heat, droughts and floods. They offer co-benefits in terms of nature and biodiversity protection and quality of life and a lower risk of maladaptation than technological and engineering solutions. The insurance sector's expertise in assessing and managing risks can inform adaptation decisions through higher premiums or refusal to insure assets at high risk from climate impacts. According to the European Environment Agency, economic losses from weather- and climate-related events in the EU amounted to €650 billion between 1980 and 2022, of which only 19.5 % were insured. The Climate Overshoot Commission identifies six success factors for adaptation measures: financial instruments and policies based on local assessments of climate risk and adaptation priorities, complemented by adaptation metrics; assessments integrated into action plans; early warnings for all; stronger efforts to address climate mobility (migration, displacement, planned resettlement); and interventions to enhance the resilience of agriculture and agri-food systems. The European Environment Agency recommends to take adaption actions when the expected cost-benefit ratio exceeds 1.5, and carefully examine adaptation actions with a lower ratio, because of uncertainty.

Adaptation under the Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement defines a global goal on adaptation, aiming to enhance adaptive capacity, strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability to climate change. Only a quarter of international climate finance has been dedicated to adaptation, although the Paris Agreement calls for a balance between mitigation and adaptation. Moreover, finance for adaptation fell by 15 % in 2021, leaving a gap of US$194 to 366 billion per year between needed and actual funding for adaptation.

COP28 took place in 2023, hosted by the United Arab Emirates. Many key issues were discussed and agreed upon during the conference. Those that are directly related to climate change adaptation are the adoption of the framework for achieving the Paris Agreement's global goal on adaptation and the presentation of a report by the Standing Committee on Finance on the developed countries' pledge to double adaptation finance from 2019 levels by 2025, as agreed at COP26.

EU policy and action on climate adaptation

The European Climate Law requires Member States to draw up national adaptation strategies and plans and ensure continuous progress on climate adaptation. The EU strategy on adaptation to climate change aims to make climate adaptation smarter, faster and more systemic. The EU-supported Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy engages towns and cities in reaching EU mitigation and adaptation targets, with resources like the urban adaptation support tool. The European Climate-ADAPT platform lets users access and share data and information on expected climate change, regional and sectoral vulnerability, adaptation strategies and options, case studies and tools for adaptation planning. The EU Mission on Adaptation under the Horizon Europe programme aims to support at least 150 regions, towns and cities in efforts towards climate resilience. Nevertheless, at local level there are still many barriers to adaptation planning and financing, including lack of expertise, insufficient human resources and a lack of political support. With the European Green Deal, the European Climate Law and the 'fit for 55 package', the EU has set a world-leading framework for a green and just transition towards climate neutrality. In the light of current and future climate impacts, the time has come to demonstrate equally high ambition on adaptation across all levels of governance.

5. The future of the EU automotive sector

The EU automotive sector has a century-old tradition of producing vehicles with internal combustion engines (ICE). It enjoys a global reputation for mechanical-engineering excellence, quality, design and creativity. Today, the sector is at a crossroads: the green transition, digitalisation and global competition have fundamentally altered its business model. The sector has to adapt quickly to mitigate the risks associated with these disruptive trends.

A historical European industrial sector with strong regional ties

Vehicle manufacturers, their suppliers and aftermarket services account for 12.9 million direct and indirect jobs in the EU, of which 3.1 million are in the manufacturing sector. The automotive sector represents around 8 % of the EU's GDP. The EU still has some of the world's leading carmakers and automotive suppliers. In 2022, 13 million vehicles were produced in the EU (including cars, vans, trucks and buses), 1 million more than in 2021. Car production increased at its highest rate in the last 10 years (+8.3 %), to 10.9 million units, after four years of decline (although not reaching its pre-pandemic level). The sector counts a large number of specialised SMEs and is key in the economy of some regions, where manufacturers and their suppliers work in clusters. The sector is the leader in terms of research and development (R&D) spending in the EU, with one third of total R&D expenditure.

The major trends reshaping the automotive industry globally

Electrification has been the key strategy deployed by the industry to produce zero tailpipe emission vehicles and decarbonise the sector. Electric vehicles are mainly powered by lithium-ion batteries. The sale of electric vehicles is booming. In 2022, 10 million electric vehicles were sold worldwide (battery electric vehicles and plug-in hybrid electric vehicles combining a smaller battery with an ICE). This is 100 times more than in 2012. The same year, the share of electric cars in total car sales jumped from 9 % in 2021 to 14 %. The International Energy Agency expects this share to reach 18 % in 2023. In the EU, their market share has increased six-fold since 2019, reaching 12.1 % in 2022.

Furthermore, vehicles are expected to become ever more connected, i.e. able to exchange information with other vehicles, roadside infrastructure and other third parties. By 2030 four cars in five could be internet-enabled. Vehicles are also becoming more autonomous: although full autonomy is still far from being widespread, more limited autonomy features have already been deployed in some regions. In addition, shared mobility, entailing a switch from vehicle ownership to vehicle usership, based on short-term access to vehicles, is expected to become more common.

Vehicles therefore are tending to become high-performance 'computers on wheel', being increasingly dependent on chips and software, for instance enabling advanced driver-assistance features. While chips represented 16 % of the overall vehicle value for ICE vehicles in 2019, this share could reach 35 % for battery electric vehicles by 2025, and rise further in the following years. Moreover, software is now as important as

Recent EU developments: Short overview

Under the European Green Deal, the EU has developed a regulatory framework to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. Regulation (EU) 2023/851, part of the 'fit for 55' package, sets stricter CO_2 emission performance standards for new cars and vans: by 2035, all new vehicles will be zero emission. Regulation (EU) 2023/1542 on batteries and waste batteries introduced requirements from design to end-of-life for batteries, to improve the sustainability of the value chain. Regulation (EU) 2023/1804 on the deployment of alternative fuels infrastructure sets mandatory national targets for the deployment of sufficient charging stations for electric vehicles. The proposal for a Euro 7 regulation aims at setting new standards to reduce pollutant emissions from vehicles. The proposal for a regulation setting circularity requirements for vehicle design and management of end-of-life vehicles aims at improving resource efficiency in the sector. The proposal for a net-zero industry act would support the production of batteries in the EU.

hardware, becoming the distinguishing features of vehicles. The software content of vehicles has tripled since 2015.

A range of economic factors are also weighing upon the EU sector, such as weak economic growth, higher energy costs than in some competing third countries, disruption in key supply chains (chips shortages remained the primary limiting factor for EU car production in 2022), geopolitical risks, and industrial policies of third countries, such as the United States' Inflation Reduction Act and China's extensive government interventions.

Can European companies thrive in the new competitive landscape?

These trends have altered the fundamentals of the industry. In this context, new companies, coming from the battery or the tech sectors, for example, have been able to enter the market and leapfrog incumbents. As a result, the global hierarchy of car production could quickly change.

Spending billions to develop a range of ICEs, with different technical requirements, is obviously not needed to produce electric cars. Moreover, electric cars are simpler to assemble than ICE vehicles, as much fewer parts are needed. Assembly time for an electric vehicle could be 67 % lower than for ICE vehicles. European incumbent companies have difficulty making profitable electric vehicles, particularly due to the high cost of batteries (the battery represents between 30 % and 50 % of the cost of an electric vehicle).

Competitors, such as China, have thrived in this context, betting on electric cars. Analysts have warned that Chinese automotive companies could become the force shaping the global automotive industry in the coming years. Over the past decades, the country has risen as an electric vehicle manufacturing hub. In October 2021, it became a net auto exporter for the first time. Electric vehicles made in China are less expensive than rivals' and of increasing quality. Two trends are emerging: first, Chinese-owned firms are becoming increasingly competitive and exporting more to new markets, and second, China is becoming a manufacturing export hub for multinational companies. In 2022, 35 % of all exported electric cars originated from China, 10 percentage points higher than the previous year.

In 2023, China is set to become the top global car exporter, mostly to Europe and Asia, in a context of over-capacity problems on the national market. It is expected to keep this top position for years. China also dominates production of almost every raw material and component used to make electric vehicles. Around 65 % of battery cells and almost 80 % of cathodes are manufactured in China. In October 2023, China imposed export curbs on natural graphite, a raw material that is strategic for the EU, particularly used to produce batteries and steel. Under current conditions, it is likely that European imports from China will continue to rise. On 4 October 2023, the European Commission initiated anti-subsidy investigations into EU imports of battery electric vehicles from China. After investigations of up to nine months, the Commission may impose provisional, and after 13 months, definitive, countervailing tariffs for five years.

Most European companies are still lagging behind in electric vehicle innovation. No European company is a top innovator in software architecture, connectivity or autonomous driving. Incumbent firms have to urgently rethink their business model. New technologies demand new ways of doing business as revenue streams from services will be needed to ensure profitability.

To thrive, the sector needs to have secure access to affordable batteries and semiconductors, improve its innovation capacities in new technologies, reduce its costs, and adopt a more circular approach – particularly to recover critical raw materials. Moreover, supporting infrastructure (grid, chargers, high-speed data transfer) must be developed quickly, and efforts are required to reskill and upskill workers. This will require huge investments. Companies have already started adapting their business models and strategies, for instance by moving towards vertical integration (e.g. to ensure supplies of raw materials). In September 2023, on the eve of the state of the Union address, representatives of the EU automotive value chain urged the Commission to better support the sector.

6. Financing Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction

The year 2024 will be crucial for Ukraine's defence against the Russian occupiers as well as for the country's recovery and reconstruction. Three issues call for particular attention: firstly, a new EU financing mechanism, the Ukraine Facility, is supposed to fund Ukraine from 2024; secondly, Ukraine's accession to the EU will move forward in 2024 with the opening of negotiations; thirdly, the Ukraine Recovery Conference in Berlin in June 2024 is expected to provide additional momentum for more private investment into Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction. The European Union will remain a key supporter for Ukraine.

EU support essential for Ukraine's victory

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has led to a dramatic economic downturn in Ukraine. The country's gross domestic product (GDP) declined by 29.1 % in 2022. That development, combined with the need to increase military spending significantly has put massive pressure on Ukraine's public finances. The total support made available to Ukraine since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion by 'Team Europe', consisting of the EU and its Member States, amounts to over €68 billion. Together with the support for Ukrainian refugees in the EU, the overall support amounts to €85 billion. If the recently proposed Ukraine Facility of €50 billion is added, the amount will reach €135 billion, which is by far the largest amount provided by anyone worldwide. The US is second with overall support of €71 billion. In spite of a surprisingly resilient Ukrainian economy, with expected 4.5 % growth in 2023, EU support will remain essential for Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction as well as for the country's financial stability and its victory against Russia.

Rolling out the EU's Ukraine Facility

The EU's Ukraine Facility is designed to support Ukraine, its recovery, its modernisation and its path to EU accession, allocating up to €50 billion for 2024 to 2027. Parliament adopted its position for trilogue negotiations on the Facility on 17 October 2023. Initially, the Facility was supposed to be operational by 1 January 2024. However, as the December 2023 European Council meeting failed to agree on a mid-term revision of the multiannual financial framework (MFF), at the time of publishing, the Council was still lacking a mandate for negotiations on that proposal. As the current financial support for Ukraine through the MFA+ programme ended on 31 December 2023, a solution has to be found fast to continue funding in 2024. One solution could be a targeted transitional MFA programme for the early months of 2024, until the Ukraine Facility can be agreed and become operational. Another option could be guarantees issued by EU Member States to the EU budget so that the Commission could borrow €20 billion for Ukraine on the markets. Neither of those two options needs unanimity. However, if one Member State continues to block a joint EU solution, the other 26 Member States have announced their readiness to act outside the EU in order to ensure the continuation of funding to Ukraine.

In its position on the Ukraine Facility, which is still the preferred option for the European Parliament and the large majority of Member States, Parliament insists on enhancing multiparty democracy and opposition rights in Ukraine, which need to be further strengthened in the candidate country. Furthermore, Parliament wants to allow civil society to feed valuable ideas into the procedure and to increase the transparency of the Facility. Therefore, the European Parliament insists that the Verkhovna Rada, the parliament of Ukraine, approve the draft 'Ukraine plan' as prepared by the government of Ukraine, before the country's government submits it to the European Commission. Furthermore, Ukraine and the Commission must together ensure that the Rada and civil society organisations are duly informed and consulted on the design and implementation of the 'Ukraine plan'.

Ukraine Recovery Conference in Berlin in June 2024: Connecting EU accession, rule of law, private investment and recovery

After the successful Ukraine Recovery Conferences in Lugano in July 2022 and in London in June 2023, the next conference is scheduled to be hosted in Berlin on 11 and 12 June 2024. The conference is supposed to focus on facilitating and incentivising further private investment for Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction. The Ukrainian government estimates the overall funds needed for reconstruction at more than US$700 billion; former EIB President Werner Hoyer estimated the cost of reconstruction at €1 trillion. The major share of those reconstruction costs would have to be financed by private investment. On 8 November 2023, the European Commission adopted the 2023 enlargement package, providing a detailed assessment of the state of play and the progress made by Ukraine on its path towards EU accession. On 14 December 2023, the European Council agreed to open negotiations with Ukraine. The EU accession process is seen as a strong driver for rule of law, reform of the judiciary and the fight against corruption. Further reforms in those areas are judged as particularly crucial for private companies ready to invest in Ukraine.

In the past, candidate countries for EU accession have had, on average, 56 % of EU per capita income on the eve of their accessions. Ukraine's 2021 per capita income was 13 % of the EU average. EU membership will be neither possible nor advisable if Ukraine's economy remains so substantially under-developed in comparison. Independent of the recovery from the war, Ukraine urgently needs more investment, higher productivity and more growth. One challenge for Ukraine is its large number of inefficient and too often corrupt state-owned enterprises. At the central level alone, Ukraine owns 3 500 enterprises, which account for about one 10th of GDP and about 18 % of employment. With the exception of Naftogaz, state-owned enterprises make hardly any profits. Ukraine should identify a small number of enterprises that are of strategic relevance and should therefore be kept in public hands, and organise the privatisation of all others. Since 2014, a number of significant reforms in Ukraine have been driven by the active participation of civil society. In certain cases, such as public procurement reform, experts judge the role of Ukrainian civil society as a decisive success factor. The civil society project RISE Ukraine, together with the Ukrainian government, plans to build DREAM, a digital platform that will provide a single and transparent digital route for all reconstruction projects.

It is not only in the interests of Ukraine but also in the interest of the European Union and all other international donors to enable Ukraine to win the war fast and make Ukraine's recovery a success. The sooner Ukraine becomes a vibrant democracy with a stable rule of law environment and a functioning social market economy, the sooner Ukraine will be able to finance its further recovery and reconstruction from its own tax income and through massive private sector investment.

A democratic Ukraine as a beacon of freedom and prosperity on Europe's eastern flank

A democratic Ukraine, based on the rule of law and with a successful market economy could act as a beacon of freedom and prosperity and thus as a successful catalyst for democratic change in the whole of eastern Europe, including in Russia, Belarus and other former Soviet republics. Serhii Plokhy, a leading historian of Ukraine, presumes, in his most recent book *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* that that would be something Vladimir Putin fears most, and might well have been one decisive reason for his starting the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In his speech at the 2023 Ukraine Recovery Conference, Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated that 'Russia's bosses' were very afraid of democracy, because democracy paved the way for the rule of law, for getting rid of corruption and for the key principle that every person mattered. The Ukrainian President pointed out: 'The more rule of law we have, the more law will work here on the eastern flank of Europe. And the more transparent Ukraine is, the uglier any corruption model will look in Russia'.

7. Prosecution of international core crimes and reparation for victims in Russia's war on Ukraine

Russia's unprovoked aggression on Ukraine, condemned by the international community as a blatant violation of the United Nations (UN) Charter, and seen as a challenge to the entire rules-based order, has led to a series of legal actions aimed at bringing international justice and reparation for the victims. Several international courts are dealing with various aspects of this conflict, with some proceedings having received particular public attention.

Litigation in international courts and investigations

The **International Criminal Court (ICC)** is a permanent international court (not a UN body) established in The Hague on the basis of the Statute of Rome (2002, 'SoR'). It exercises jurisdiction over individuals who have committed the most serious crimes for the international community, i.e. genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and crimes of aggression, either in a state party, in a state that has accepted its jurisdiction, or by an accused person who is a national of a state party. Ukraine is not a party to the Statute of Rome, but it accepted the ICC's jurisdiction over crimes committed on Ukraine's territory in two declarations: first in April 2014 for acts committed during the Euromaidan events (21 November 2013 to 22 February 2014); second in September 2015 for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed as from 20 February 2014 onwards by leaders of the Russian Federation, Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Lugansk People's Republic (LRN). Investigations by the ICC can be triggered upon referral of a state party, the UN Security Council or upon the initiative of the ICC's prosecutor. Upon referral of 43 states parties, on 2 March 2022, the ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan announced the decision to start investigations on the situation in Ukraine for crimes committed from 21 November 2013 onwards.

Prosecution of the crime of aggression (incorporated in the ICC's jurisdiction with the Kampala Conference in 2010) requires formally being a state party (after ratification of the Rome Statute). The mere acceptance of ICC jurisdiction is not sufficient. For this reason, other options to address the crime of aggression, such as the establishment of an ad hoc international tribunal, have been explored by scholars, who are not unanimous. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe have all supported the proposal of a special tribunal. The Commission has also discussed the establishment of an ad hoc or hybrid court, i.e. an international court integrated into Ukraine's judicial system, although this option presents legal challenges and uncertainties. On 15 March 2023, the ICC Pre-Trial Chamber II issued arrest warrants against Vladimir Putin and his Commissioner for children's rights, Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, with the allegation of having committed the war crime of unlawful deportation of children and unlawful transfer of children from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation. This entails that states party to the Rome Statute are obliged to arrest the addressees of the warrants if they enter their territory. ICC jurisdiction indeed is not prevented by immunities such as those of heads of state or holders of other state functions (Article 27 SoR). Failing such arrest, no trial can take place as the ICC may not hear cases without the physical presence of the accused (Article 63(1) SoR). The Russian Federation issued in its turn arrest warrants against several judges involved in the above case, raising concerns of the UN Human Rights Office.

The **International Court of Justice (ICJ)**, also based in The Hague, is the main UN judicial organ. It exercises jurisdiction over cases brought to it by UN member states, states that are parties to the Court's Statute and states that, not being such parties, have declared to accept the ICJ's jurisdiction based on a jurisdictional clause contained in treaties and conventions. The ICJ hears disputes only between states (not cases initiated by individuals, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), companies or private entities). The ICJ is not a criminal court, therefore it does not have a prosecutor

able to initiate proceedings. Since the Russian Federation claimed that Ukraine had committed acts of genocide in the Oblasts of Luhansk and Donetsk as a reason to initiate the 'special military operation' on Ukrainian territory, on 26 February 2022 Ukraine filed a case before the ICJ against the Russian Federation to ascertain that Ukraine did not violate the 1948 Genocide Convention. The pending case also seeks to ascertain that Russia cannot take any action according to the Genocide Convention to prevent alleged genocide, and the illegality of Russia's recognition of the independence of the DPR and LPR, and requests full reparations for the damages caused by actions of the Russian Federation based on false genocide claims. On 16 March 2022, the ICJ handed down a provisional order requesting the Russian Federation to suspend the military operations in Ukraine and stop any action of military or irregular army under Russia's direction. The case is still pending, but the ICJ has decided positively on the admissibility of the declaration of intervention of 33 states. A number of sittings took place in 2023.

Interstate cases against Russia have been filed also at the **European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)**, the Council of Europe court, based in Strasbourg, not only for mass and gross human-rights violations committed by the Russian Federation in its military operations on the territory of Ukraine since 24 February 2022 (application No 11055/22), but also for facts prior to 2022. Further to that, a number of individual claims are pending with the ECtHR also dating from since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. While Russia ceased to be member of the Council of Europe in March 2022, the ECtHR remains competent for applications up until 16 September 2022.

The EU supports Ukraine in the evidence-gathering phase in several ways. In particular, a joint investigation team (JIT) set up in March 2022 by Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine, thereafter joined by Estonia, Latvia, Romania and Slovakia, and in March 2023 by Europol and the Office of the ICC Prosecutor. The JIT facilitates investigations with the support of Eurojust and coordinates JIT work on investigations carried out in 20 other countries. Eurojust also hosts the International centre for the prosecution of the crime of aggression against Ukraine (ICPA) established in July 2023, which provides substantial assistance in carrying out investigations and preparing cases. The ICPA is composed of prosecutors already participating in the JITs who will be able to work together, share and exchange evidence and coordinate its work. To support the evidence-gathering activity, which is crucial in substantiating war crimes, in 2023 the EU created the core international crimes evidence database (CICED), a central judicial database to preserve, analyse and store evidence of core international crimes. National authorities of EU Member States and liaison prosecutors at Eurojust may submit evidence, via secure file transfer, such as video, audio recordings, satellite images, testimonies and medical or forensic documents.

Reparations

Although there is no doubt that Russia is obliged to make reparations under international law, this was re-affirmed by a UN resolution of 14 November 2022. The issue of reparations is however quite complex as the law of war provides no right to reparation for individual victims, and human rights courts as well as the ICC do not normally award sufficient and effective reparations. Against this backdrop, a number of options have been advanced by scholars (UN claims commission, domestic reparation programme; Ukrainian-Russian mixed arbitration commission and independent investigative mechanism, registry and trust fund for Ukraine). To finance these, confiscating Russian state assets, including those of the Russian Central Bank, has been explored. This avenue is not straightforward due to state immunity implications under international law. Similar concerns arise for scholarly proposals to use Russian Central Bank assets (e.g. a multilateral asset transfer) or for Commission proposals (e.g. transfer proceeds from confiscation to a common fund or active management) to retrieve funds for Ukraine's reconstruction. In the meantime, a register was created in May 2023 to record damages, loss or injury caused by the Russian aggression to natural or legal persons as well as to the Ukrainian state.

8. El Niño's knock-on effect on food security

In July 2023, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) [announced](#) the onset of El Niño, seven years after the [last event](#). El Niño (or El Niño de Navidad, since it typically peaks around December) can alter global rain patterns, affecting food production in large parts of the world. It is also associated with higher global temperatures. The 2023-2024 El Niño, [likely to be a 'strong' event](#), comes after several years of increasing food insecurity, and high inflation.

What is El Niño?

El Niño is a [climate phenomenon](#) that occurs in the tropical Pacific Ocean every two to seven years, lasting from nine months to a year (see Figure 2). It is part of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation ([ENSO](#)) phenomenon and it is characterised by warmer sea surface temperatures in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific. ENSO includes a neutral and a cooler phase, known as La Niña. El Niño events have shown recurrent patterns. Warmer waters in the Pacific can lead to increased rainfall in South America, as well as in central Asia and east Africa, through interaction with other climate phenomena. Conversely, reduced precipitation usually hit Australia, south and southern Asia, Central America, northern South America, and southern Africa. Other associated effects include wildfires, cyclones, and [disease outbreaks](#). El Niño has also been linked to [increased global temperatures](#).

Figure 2 – Global food security situation and El Niño effects on rainfall patterns
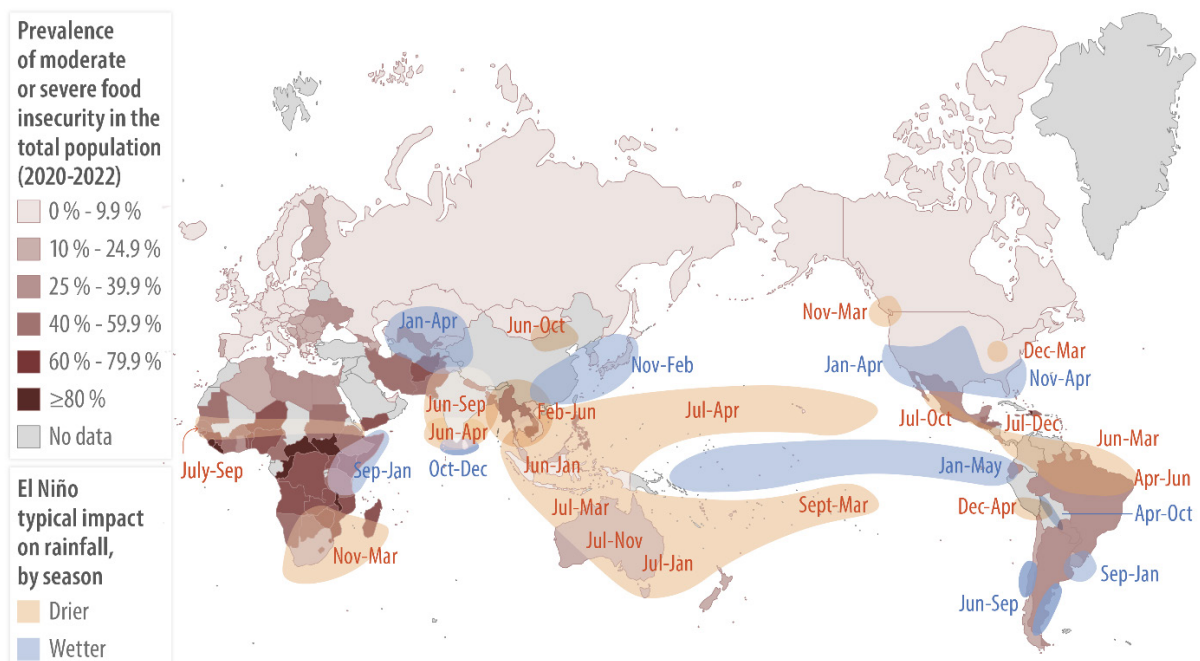
Data source: [International Research Institute for Climate and Society](#) (IRI) and [FAO Hunger Map](#).

How does it affect food security?

Weather conditions is the primary factor determining agricultural productivity. El Niño can disrupt normal rainfall patterns. Water scarcity can lead to crop and pasture failures, reduced agricultural yields, and an increased occurrence and severity of wildfires. Excessive rainfall destroys crops and critical infrastructure. El Niño also influences ocean temperatures and currents, disrupting fisheries, and impacting the livelihoods of coastal communities. Finally, even the expectation of reduced

agricultural production can lead countries to protect domestic markets by restricting food exports, increasing global food prices and food insecurity in import-dependent countries.

Previous El Niño events

The widely reported 1997-1998 El Niño caused thousands of deaths, and estimated economic losses of between US$32 and US$96 billion, with some studies suggesting far higher numbers. Massive floods destroyed crops in Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Somalia and Kenya. Conversely, water scarcity caused crop losses and acute food inflation in Indonesia, and population displacements in Papua New Guinea. Fisheries were also affected in South America, as warmer water displaced the most profitable species, devastating local fishing. The most recent, 2015-2016 El Niño event, one of the strongest ever recorded, impacted an estimated 60 million people. Droughts were reported in south and south-east Asia, affecting rice and palm oil yields. In South Africa, dry conditions resulted in the worst food production figures in 20 years. Conversely, heavy rain struck large parts of South America, causing floods in Ecuador, Peru and Argentina, which experienced its worse locust plague in decades.

Regions to watch in 2024

The ongoing El Niño is expected to last until mid-2024, impacting on regions already under high food stress. The WMO warned of a possible 'double whammy' in 2024 similar to that of 2016, when a very strong El Niño combined with human-induced global warming broke temperature records. Southern Africa, which has recently seen a steady rise in malnourishment is likely to experience below-average rainfall and reduced harvests in 2024, threatening more than 20 million people and requiring increased food assistance until 2025. Eastern Africa is expected to see increased rainfall, alleviating drought conditions and reducing food insecurity. However, there are concerns that the presence of a positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) could lead to flooding. Asia will likely see mixed effects from El Niño. Higher precipitation could end Afghanistan's three-year drought. In south and south-east Asia, below-average rainfall is expected. Rice production and exports are a source of concern, as these regions are responsible for 58 % of the world's production and 80 % of exports. Rising domestic prices led India to limit rice exports in July 2023, triggering similar measures by other producers. ASEAN countries committed to limit restrictions, but shortage fears are expected to persist in 2024, affecting many American and African countries where rice is a staple food. Central and South America will also be affected. Increased rainfall is expected in early 2024 in Peru, Ecuador and parts of Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay and southern Brazil. Higher precipitation could lead to flooding as in previous El Niño events, but also result in better agricultural yields. Fisheries on the Pacific coast are likely to diminish. Central and South America and the Caribbean could experience drier conditions. These areas are some of the most food-stressed in Latin America, especially the Caribbean with nearly two thirds of the population moderately or severely food insecure.

What about the EU?

El Niño effects on Europe are less evident, although a colder and drier winter in northern Europe, and wetter in the south can be expected. The EU is self-sufficient in food, but affordability is a concern for nearly half of Europeans. Recent extreme weather events, resulting in crop losses across Europe, have been a key driver of EU food inflation. As El Niño has been linked to warmer global temperatures, 2024 could again see crop losses. Given the EU livestock sector's dependency on protein imports, possible El Niño effects on soybean production could be reflected in EU meat and dairy prices. Finally, El Niño could disrupt international logistics networks, such as the Panama Canal, driving up the prices of energy and agricultural inputs. Climate adaptation is a key objective of the 'farm to fork' strategy, increasing EU agriculture's resilience to future weather shocks, including El Niño-related. Other tools to cushion possible El Niño effects in the EU include financial support to farmers or temporary derogations of CAP rules, already used following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

9. The 2024 US elections: A watershed moment?

On 5 November 2024, Americans will cast their votes for the 47th US president and vice-president, plus around a third of Senators and all 435 voting members of the House of Representatives of the US Congress. Election day will yet again show a US deeply divided over domestic and foreign policy, rather than a united country. Democrats and Republicans are equally (84 %) worried about the state of their democracy. But which version of democracy will they vote for?
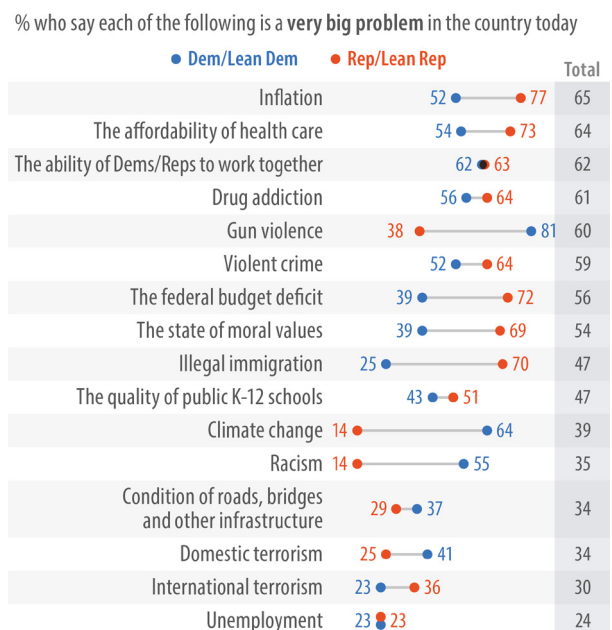
A likely Biden–Trump rematch with roles reversed?

Ten months away from election day, the Democratic camp has largely coalesced around President Joe Biden's re-election bid. He dwarfs his few long-shot challengers, but given concerns about his age and recently about his Middle East policy, he is not undisputed either. The Republican camp, despite early drop outs, is more crowded, but all candidates, including Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former South Carolina Governor and US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, trail former President Donald Trump in polls by a significant margin. Trump wields large influence on Republican politics, and commands a loyal voter base despite his four indictments on multiple criminal charges that he deems a 'witch hunt'. In several states, court cases are pending that seek to disqualify him based on the 'insurrection clause' of the US Constitution's 14th Amendment. The Constitution's eligibility rules would not prevent a jailed candidate from becoming president, but swing voters might withdraw their support. Polls suggest that barring unexpected circumstances, e.g. sudden health issues, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party are likely to nominate Biden and Trump as their candidates later in 2024, a scenario that 64 % of voters indicate would signal that the US political system is broken. An independent, e.g. Robert F. Kennedy Jr, or a potential 'no label' candidate appear to have scarce chance of winning, but could act as spoilers by siphoning votes from Biden or Trump in narrow races in battleground states.

How do Biden's policies resonate with a highly polarised US society?

Despite Biden's name recognition, visibility as the incumbent president and an impressive legislative record, his job approval rating since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has remained under water. In late 2023 polls, he trailed Trump in voter backing, notably in vital swing states where his 'Bidenomics', i.e. Biden's mantra of growing the economy 'from the middle out and the bottom up', appears to lack buy-in as an alternative to the Republican 'trickle down economics'. As most voters' top priorities are perceived high inflation, food and energy prices and mortgage rates (see Figure 3), their long-standing perception of the Republican Party as dealing better with the economy creates an uphill battle for Democrats. The same is true of illegal immigration, one of the most divisive security-related election topics, which has steeply increased on Biden's watch, after Trump's 'zero tolerance' policy was dismantled. Biden has spearheaded student debt relief

Figure 3 – US voters' top priorities

% who say each of the following is a **very big problem** in the country today

	Dem/Lean Dem	Rep/Lean Rep	Total
Inflation	52	77	65
The affordability of health care	54	73	64
The ability of Dems/Reps to work together	62	63	62
Drug addiction	56	64	61
Gun violence	38	81	60
Violent crime	52	64	59
The federal budget deficit	39	72	56
The state of moral values	39	69	54
Illegal immigration	25	70	47
The quality of public K-12 schools	43	51	47
Climate change	14	64	39
Racism	14	55	35
Condition of roads, bridges and other infrastructure	29	37	34
Domestic terrorism	25	41	34
International terrorism	23	36	30
Unemployment	23	23	24

Data source: PEW Research, June 2023.

initiatives, and bills on gun safety and on large-scale infrastructure investment, lowering healthcare costs, but voter recognition has been marginal. However, abortion rights in a post Roe v. Wade world continue to galvanise voters, as the 2023 state elections showed, irrespective of Biden's low polling. Biden's lack of popularity may come as a surprise to Europeans, as 55 % of them approve of his handling of foreign policy, which traditionally is lowest on US voters' minds, and perceive him in comparison with other global leaders. On the Global leader approval rating tracker, he ranks eighth.

What could a second Biden or Trump term mean for EU-US ties?

While the 47th US president's potential impact will depend on whether his party controls the House and/or the Senate, or neither of them, experts believe that a Biden term 2.0 would mean a large degree of domestic and foreign policy continuity and predictability. Biden would likely retain his traditional approach to diplomacy focused on, albeit not always consistently applied, consensus-driven cooperation and coordination on global challenges with like-minded allies and partners, including the EU. Long-standing EU-US dialogue formats, recent ones on China/the Indo-Pacific, Russia, security and defence, trade and technology and summits would remain key tools for finding common ground, including on controversial industrial and trade policies. Given the uncertainty of the war in Ukraine, an escalating Middle East crisis and growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait, which taken together could stretch US military capabilities, experts expect that Biden could be compelled to 're-balance' transatlantic ties and ask Europe to make bigger efforts for its own security.

As regards a Trump term 2.0, some media outlets portray it as 'the return of a 'Trump unbound' – more resentful, more organised and less constrained than in his first term'. Trump could draw on the policy work of Republican think-tanks, such as the America First Policy Institute and the Heritage Foundation. The latter's 'Project 2025' sets out a broad policy agenda 'by and for conservatives'. Critics argue that it, inter alia, suggests a push for alignment of career civil servants, the alleged 'deep state', with America First policies pursuant to Trump's 2020 executive order, known as Schedule F, which Biden revoked. Observers argue that the plan to 'deconstruct the Administrative State', which would also affect the Department of Justice, would pose a threat to US democracy. Experts expect major shifts in the US approach to allies, international organisations, climate and energy, but some continuity on China. Republicans reject climate change policies, except when they target China, support fossil fuel industries and seek to undo Biden's green transition bills and dismantle related offices in federal agencies.

On trade, the future direction is unclear, since Republican 'fair traders' co-exist with 'free traders'. Trump may build on Biden's 'Buy American' industrial and reshoring policies and stick to his idea of imposing new universal tariffs of 10 % on US imports. On defence, he may be discouraged from seeking to pull the US out of NATO given legal guardrails enacted by Congress in late 2023, but may press NATO members on the 2 % spending target or even on burden-shifting, and wind down the US military posture in Europe. Trump has claimed that he would end the war in Ukraine 'within 24 hours' and some assert that his unorthodox relationship with autocratic leaders could lead to a US-Russia 'peace deal' on Ukraine and to the end of the US's 'as long as it takes' commitment to Ukraine. While in 2023 a majority of US citizens still backed US aid for Ukraine, Republican voters' support declined faster than support among Democrats (see Figure 4), with growing Republican resistance in Congress to approving budgetary funds for Ukraine.

Figure 4 – US citizens' support for Ukraine

% who say the US is providing _____ support to Ukraine
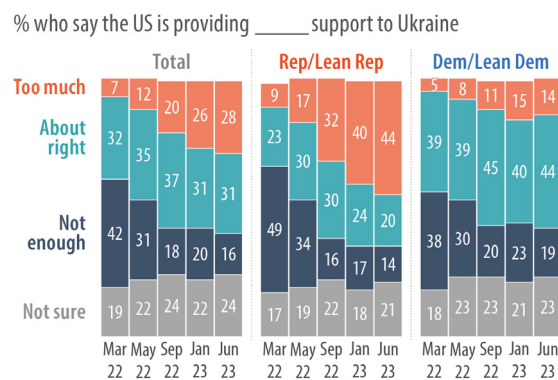
Note: no answer responses not shown

Data source: PEW research, June 2023.

10. India's rise: Ready to be a great power?

Following China's growth in the past two decades, experts are considering the potential rise of current middle-ranking powers, such as India, Brazil, or Turkey. The 2024 general election could see Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose vision is that India, the world's biggest democracy, is poised to 'shape this new order, thanks to its "trinity" of demography, democracy and diversity', remain in power.

As experts observe the changing nature of the international system towards a paradigm of either bipolarity (United States and China as the two major powers) or multipolarity (with multiple determinants of power), an important conversation about India's future and its role in international relations has emerged. Is India potentially a great power? The year 2024 may give some indication.

What is a great power?

While the debate on what constitutes a great power is not settled, a recognised definition is a state that can play a major international role through its economic, diplomatic, and military power.

Economically, a great power's strength derives from its gross domestic product (GDP), the centrality of its currency, access to natural resources (water, energy, materials for the country's manufacturing industry and critical raw materials), role in the international financial system, and importance in international trade (and composition of that trade), but also its place within international economic and financial institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and multilateral development banks). Investments in the future, in the form for example of digital infrastructure, and research and development, and also the absence of, or control over, costs such as debt, welfare costs, pollution, internal security issues, and relations with its immediate neighbours, matter too.

Diplomatic influence can be assessed in the regional and global reach of a country's diplomatic network, and in its participation and influence in multilateral fora and organisations. A country's international economic (or infrastructure) initiatives (e.g. the US 'Marshall Plan' or China's Belt and Road Initiative) can also increase its international influence.

Military strength covers both defensive and an offensive aspects as well as 'mixed' elements (such as space research and nuclear energy, for military and civilian use).

Finally, an important area of international influence is soft power, i.e. the promotion of education (programmes and exchanges), culture (exhibitions, festivals) and sports (world games), climate diplomacy as well as, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine diplomacy.

India in 2024: A critical year?

Against the backdrop of the growing China-US rivalry, the Indo-Pacific's geostrategic importance is increasing, and India's strategic footprint in the region is growing.

The country's economy is on an upward path: in 2022, it became the world's fifth largest economy although in purchasing power standards, it was already fourth in 2017. Since 2021, its GDP has grown faster than China's, a trend projected to continue in 2023 and 2024 (6.3 % vs 4.2 % for China). Its high-tech, pharmaceuticals and aerospace sectors are world-class industries. It is negotiating free trade agreements with the EU and the UK, and is strengthening trade ties with the US. This should allow it to increase its exports, better integrate into the value chains of US, UK and EU companies, attract more investment and benefit from technical cooperation. Looking to the future, analysts suggest that India could be the next great economic power, with Goldman Sachs predicting that it will replace China as the world's second-largest economy by 2075.

Infrastructure has been an important focal point for observers of India's rise. The country has increased spending on physical infrastructure significantly, and has successfully promoted its digital public infrastructure in international fora, such as the G20. It is party to important connectivity projects, such as the international north-south transport corridor and the India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor, which have the potential to transform infrastructure connectivity in Asia and beyond. It is a founding member of the coalition for disaster resilient infrastructure. India has also expanded its grant assistance, lines of credit, technical consulting, disaster relief, humanitarian aid, educational scholarships, and other programmes for countries in its region (Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) and African countries (US$12.35 billion in credit). With space emerging as a new domain of international competition, India could derive power from the fact that it has a developed space programme. It is the first country to land a lunar rover on the moon's south pole. Its successes in space also contribute to its internal development, in areas such as disaster management, education, health care, agriculture, fisheries and urban planning.

On the diplomatic scene, India is one of the initial members of the BRICS group, which is set to expand as of January 2024 from 5 members to 11, and a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization of which it held the presidency in 2023. In 2023 it also held the presidency of the G20, where it championed the digital public infrastructure and climate finance agenda. Membership of these organisations allows New Delhi to be an important interlocutor with both the West and countries at odds with Western powers. India also has the potential to play a greater role through its soft power, including through Bollywood cinema, tourism, Indian cuisine, cricket and yoga. Its diaspora is the largest in the world.

In spite of the signals pointing to its rise, a series of factors could challenge India's future empowerment. India has an important military, both in size and in terms of expenditure (US$73.8 billion in 2023, the third largest globally behind the US and China) and it is one of the few countries with a nuclear arsenal. It has strengthened its military partnerships with the West, and formed coalitions such as the quadrilateral security dialogue, a strategic partnership with Japan, Australia, and the US. Finally yet importantly, it has successfully contained China's rising influence across its direct neighbourhood, increasing its value as a US partner. While India's military is impressive in size, over half of its expenditure is spent on personnel and pensions, limiting the scope for defence procurement and modernisation. Similarly, as in the US or China, military manpower and expenditure have increasingly been directed towards internal security concerns (e.g. Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur) and the simmering conflicts with Pakistan and China.

Energy security is also a challenge with economic implications. India has neither oil nor natural gas to power its economy, contrary for instance to the US and Russia. Its choice to increase energy imports from Russia in 2022 could signal more dependence in the future. Moreover, experts note that the country's infrastructure is not yet able to sufficiently support its energy, trade, and business needs. Its fiscal space for further increases in infrastructure spending is limited. Tax collection is very low (around 5 % of the population pay taxes), while job creation cannot keep up with the country's employment needs (around 10 million people per year). Also, despite its size, population and sectoral achievements, the country's trade with the rest of the world has been subdued, partly due to a tradition of protectionism that had diminished for a period, but since 2014 has come back.

India is a country prone to natural disasters (e.g. floods), which could multiply in the future due to climate change (see issues 4 and 8). Its groundwater is being depleted and it has been contaminated by discharges of toxic elements from landfills and industrial facilities. The country is also the world's second most polluted country with regard to air quality. And despite important initiatives it has undertaken, such as being a founding member (with France) of the international solar alliance, its current climate policies and action are seen by experts as insufficient.

Last but not least, despite its efforts, the country is trailing others in soft power diplomacy, while its soft power is marred by the country's social (corruption, violence against women, human rights and minorities), economic (poverty and inequality) and environmental (pollution) issues.

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This is the eighth edition of an annual EPRS publication aimed at identifying and framing some of the key issues and policy areas that have the potential to feature prominently in public debate and on the political agenda of the European Union over the coming year.

The topics analysed encompass young Europeans and the European elections, fake reality and disinformation in a year of elections, the delivery on the twin transition, climate overshoot and adaptation, the future of the EU automotive sector, financing Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction, prosecution of international core crimes and reparation for victims in Russia's war on Ukraine, El Niño's knock-on effects on food security, the 2024 US elections, and India's rise.

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