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INFRA4NEXTGEN

Topline Results

European Attitudes to Climate Change, Fairness, and Action

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Introduction

Climate change remains one of the most pressing and complex environmental challenges facing the world today. The past decade has seen an increase in both the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, alongside record-breaking global temperatures.

The year 2024 marked the first time that global average temperatures exceeded 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels over a full calendar year. Both the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report and the 2023 UNEP Emissions Gap Report show that, without substantial and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, the world remains on track for a level of warming far above the targets set under the Paris Agreement.

> **"The challenge of climate change needs transformative policies capable of delivering substantial and rapid reductions in carbon emissions."**

The challenge of climate change needs transformative policies capable of delivering substantial and rapid reductions in carbon emissions. Such measures will inevitably affect the public, shaping everyday life, consumption, and energy use.

Although concern about climate change has increased markedly in recent years, this has been accompanied by a visible 'green backlash' against environmental measures that are perceived as costly or unfair. Europe-wide farmer protests and the Gilets Jaunes movement in France illustrate how climate policies that are introduced too rapidly, or without adequate consideration of fairness, can provoke strong opposition.

Understanding public beliefs and concerns about climate change, alongside perceptions of responsibility and fairness, is therefore essential for designing climate policies that are both effective and publicly supported.

Data were collected as part of the Infra4NextGen project, a project from the European Commission designed to support the NextGenerationEU's aims 'to build a greener, more digital and more resilient future'.

The project used the CROss-National Online Survey 3 (CRONOS3) panel, which is a large-scale, cross-national, probability-based, mixed-mode panel conducted across eleven European countries: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Czechia (CZ), Finland (FI), France (FR), Hungary (HU), Iceland (IS), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Slovenia (SI), and United Kingdom (UK). Fieldwork for CRONOS-3 took place between September 2024 and June 2025, comprising five 30-minute survey waves, collecting data using a web and paper questionnaire.

The content was designed in line with the five pillars of the NextGenerationEU recovery plan: Make it Green, Make it Digital, Make it Healthy, Make it Equal, and Make it Strong.

This Topline report summarises key findings relating to the Make it Green theme. The panel's Make it Green theme conceptually draws on the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 8 Climate Change and Energy module (Poortinga et al., 2018) and the comprehensive review of public opinion survey items on climate change by Kenny et al. (2024).

It presents how citizens perceive the reality and impacts of climate change (climate change beliefs and worry), the extent to which they feel personally and collectively responsible and capable of contributing to solutions (perceived responsibility and efficacy beliefs), how they balance environmental protection with economic growth (environment vs the economy), their views on the fairness of climate action (fairness beliefs), and their support for climate policies and willingness to take action (policy support and action).

Climate change beliefs and worry

Against the backdrop of intensifying climate impacts and environmental policy debates, this section explores how the public in Europe perceive the reality of climate change and the extent to which they are worried about it.

Figure 1 shows that, across all eleven CRONOS3 countries, belief that the world's climate is changing is near universal. In every participating country, at least nine out of ten respondents agree that the climate is probably or definitely changing; with the highest found in Slovenia (95.9%), France (95.8%), Austria (95.8%), and Portugal (94.9%). Belief is slightly lower in Poland but still very high (88.7%). These results indicate that climate change scepticism remains marginal within all surveyed countries (Poortinga et al, 2019).

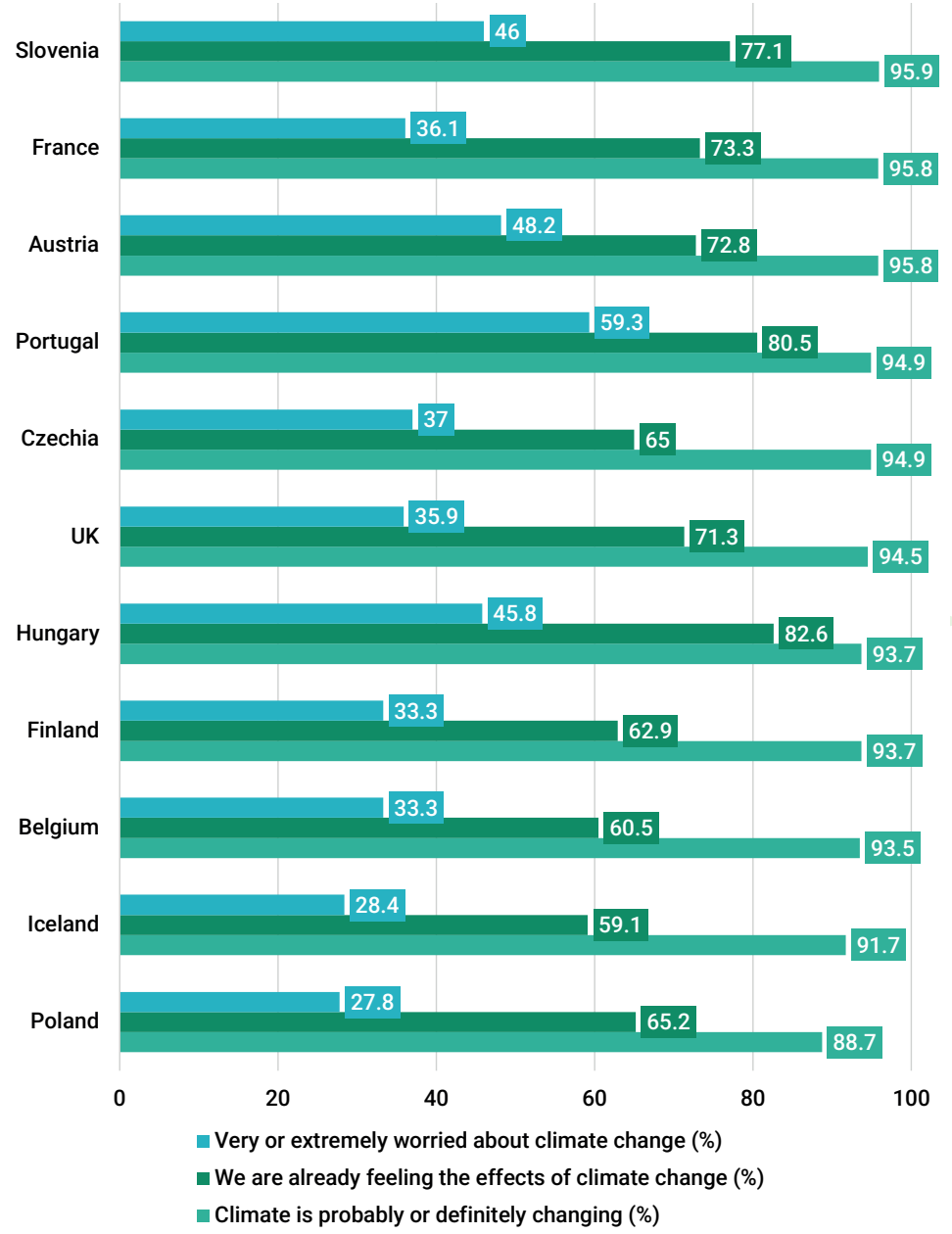
Not only do an overwhelming majority of Europeans believe that climate change is occurring, but large majorities also think that their country is already feeling its effects. On average, just over two-thirds of respondents report that they believe their country is currently experiencing the consequences of climate change. This perception is particularly strong in Hungary (82.6%) and Portugal (80.5%), whereas it is comparatively low in Iceland (59.1%), Belgium (60.5%), Finland (62.9%), Czechia (65%), and Poland (65.2%).

These findings suggest that the often-assumed psychological distance of climate change may be overestimated (Van Valkengoed et al., 2013), and that, for most people, climate change is perceived as a here-and-now issue rather than a distant threat.

Despite widespread recognition of the reality of climate change and acknowledgment that its effects are already being felt, the intensity of worry varies substantially across countries.

On average, only around four in ten respondents reported being very or extremely worried about climate change. Levels of worry are highest in Portugal (59.3%), followed some way behind by Austria (48.2%), Slovenia (46%), and Hungary (45.8%). Concern is lowest in Poland (27.8%) and Iceland (28.4%).

Figure 1. Beliefs in the reality of climate change, perceived temporal distance and levels of worry

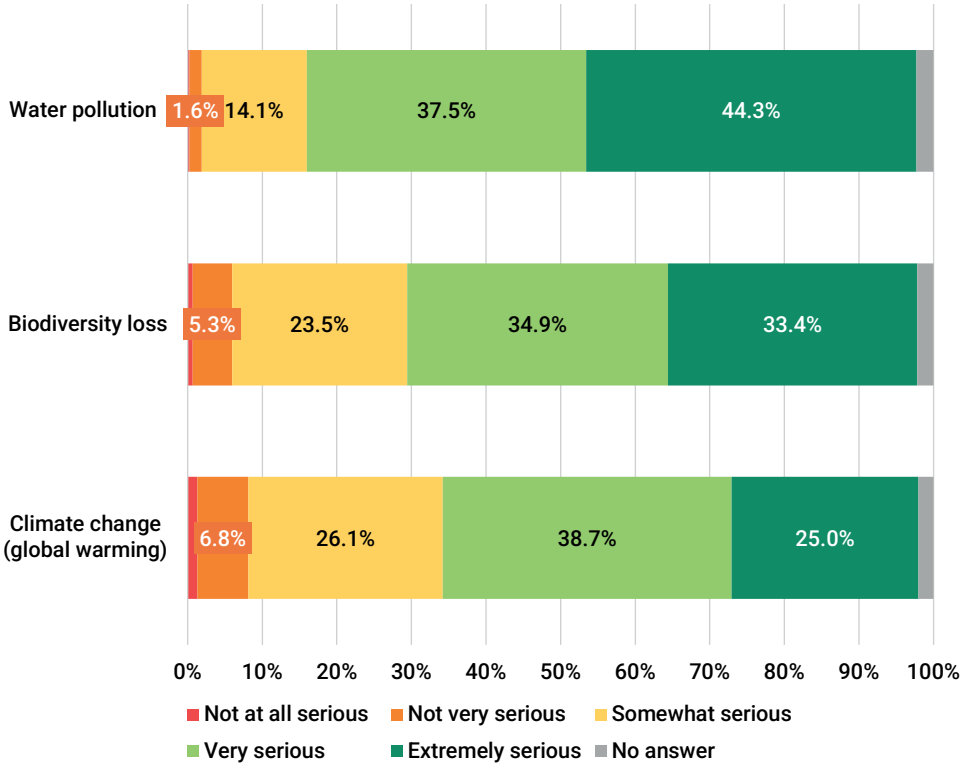


Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 1 (2024). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis: w1gq6 (n=9685), w1gq8 (n=9660).

These results indicate that, although cognitive acceptance of climate change is widespread, emotional engagement with the issue is lower across most of the surveyed countries. The results also suggest that countries that experience the consequences of climate change more acutely, will also worry about climate change more.

When asked to assess the seriousness of different environmental problems (see Figure 2), respondents most frequently identified water pollution as the most serious issue overall, with 81.8% rating it as very or extremely serious. Biodiversity loss followed, with 68.4% judging it as very or extremely serious.

Figure 2. Perceived seriousness of environmental issues



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 1 (2024). Post-stratification weights have been applied across the eleven countries: w1gq3 (n=9733), w1gq5 (n=9735).

Climate change was considered very or extremely serious by slightly fewer respondents (63.8%). These results show that, although belief in climate change is almost universal, perceived environmental priorities continue to focus more strongly on immediate and tangible threats, such as pollution and ecosystem degradation; a pattern also reflected in the relatively low levels of worry about climate change observed across countries.

“When asked to assess the seriousness of different environmental problems, respondents most frequently identified water pollution as the most serious issue overall, with 81.8% rating it as very or extremely serious.”

Perceived responsibility and efficacy beliefs

Perceived responsibility

Understanding how the public perceive responsibility for addressing climate change, and how effective they think individual and collective actions are, provides crucial insight into the potential for public willingness to take action and support climate policies (Bouman et al., 2020; Syropolous & Markowitz, 2022; Choi and Hart, 2021).

Responsibility attribution describes who people think should take action on environmental issues (e.g., whether it is mainly the government, businesses, or individuals).

In CRONOS3, respondents were asked to what extent they believe national governments, business and industry, and individuals themselves are responsible for reducing climate change, using an 11-point scale ranging from 0 ("not at all responsible") to 10 ("entirely responsible")

Figure 3 shows that respondents attributed substantial responsibility to both government, and especially business and industry, while personal responsibility was rated systematically lower.

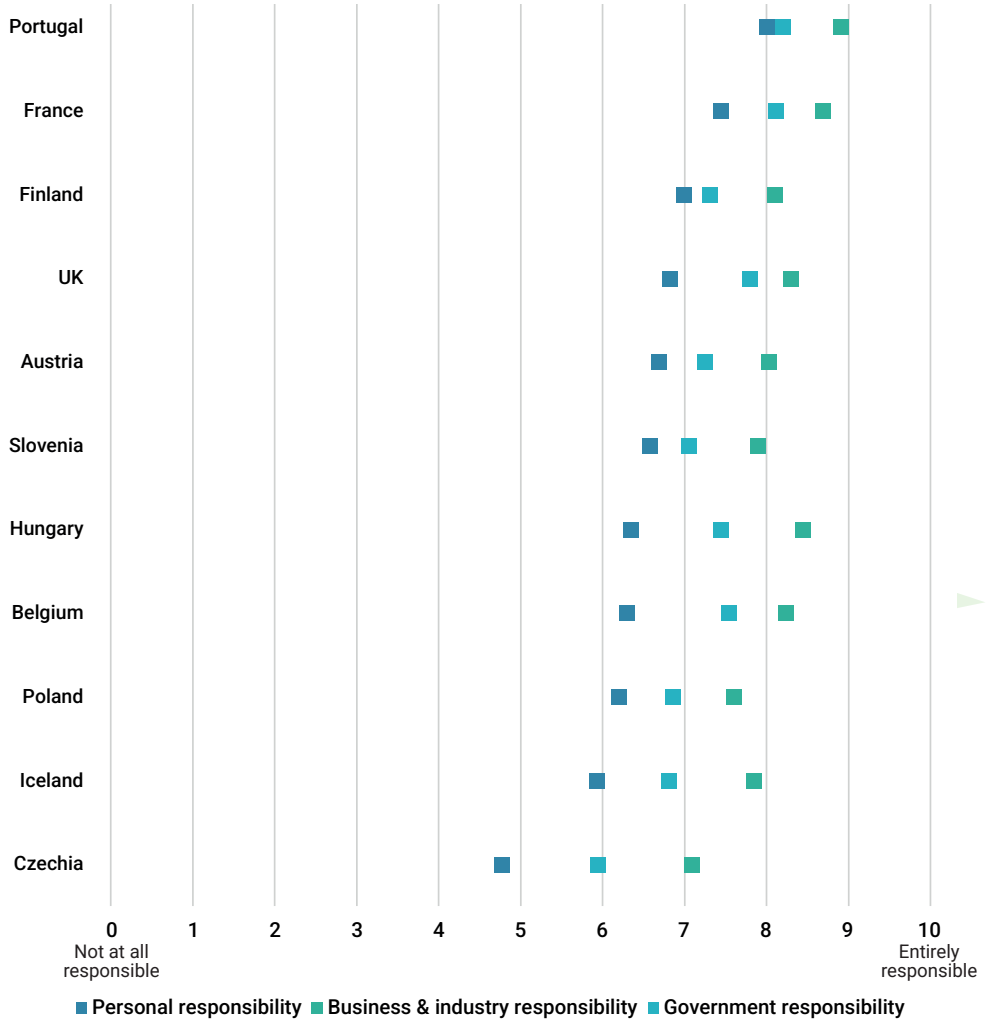
Business and industry consistently attracted the highest levels of assigned responsibility, with mean scores peaking in Portugal (8.9) and France (8.7), and remaining relatively high elsewhere. Even the lowest scores in Czechia (7.1) and Poland (7.6) indicate that businesses are widely regarded as key actors in responding to climate change.

Mean scores for government responsibility were again highest in Portugal (8.2) and France (8.1), and lowest in Czechia (5.9). Most other countries clustered between 7.0 and 7.8, including the United Kingdom (7.8), Finland (7.3), and Austria (7.2).

Perceived personal responsibility, in contrast, was more variable across countries. The strongest sense of personal responsibility was observed in Portugal (8.0) and France (7.4), while more moderate levels appeared in Austria (6.7), the United Kingdom (6.8), and Finland (7.0). Lower levels were found in Czechia (4.8) and Iceland (5.9).

Overall, the structure of responsibility attribution can be summarised as business ≥

Figure 3. Perceived responsibility for addressing climate change (0-10 scale)



Source: CRONOS3, Wave 1 (2024). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis: w1gq9 (n=9677), w1gq11 (n=9605).

government > individuals, though Portugal and France stand out as countries where citizens report elevated personal responsibility alongside strong expectations of institutional leadership.

Perceived responsibility and efficacy beliefs

Collective efficacy

Climate change is a collective problem that can only be solved through coordinated action, making beliefs about the effectiveness of such actions crucial for motivating pro-environmental behaviour. According to the collective action model (Lubell, 2002), engagement in climate action depends on efficacy beliefs, specifically, the conviction that individual actions matter and that others will also contribute to collective efforts.

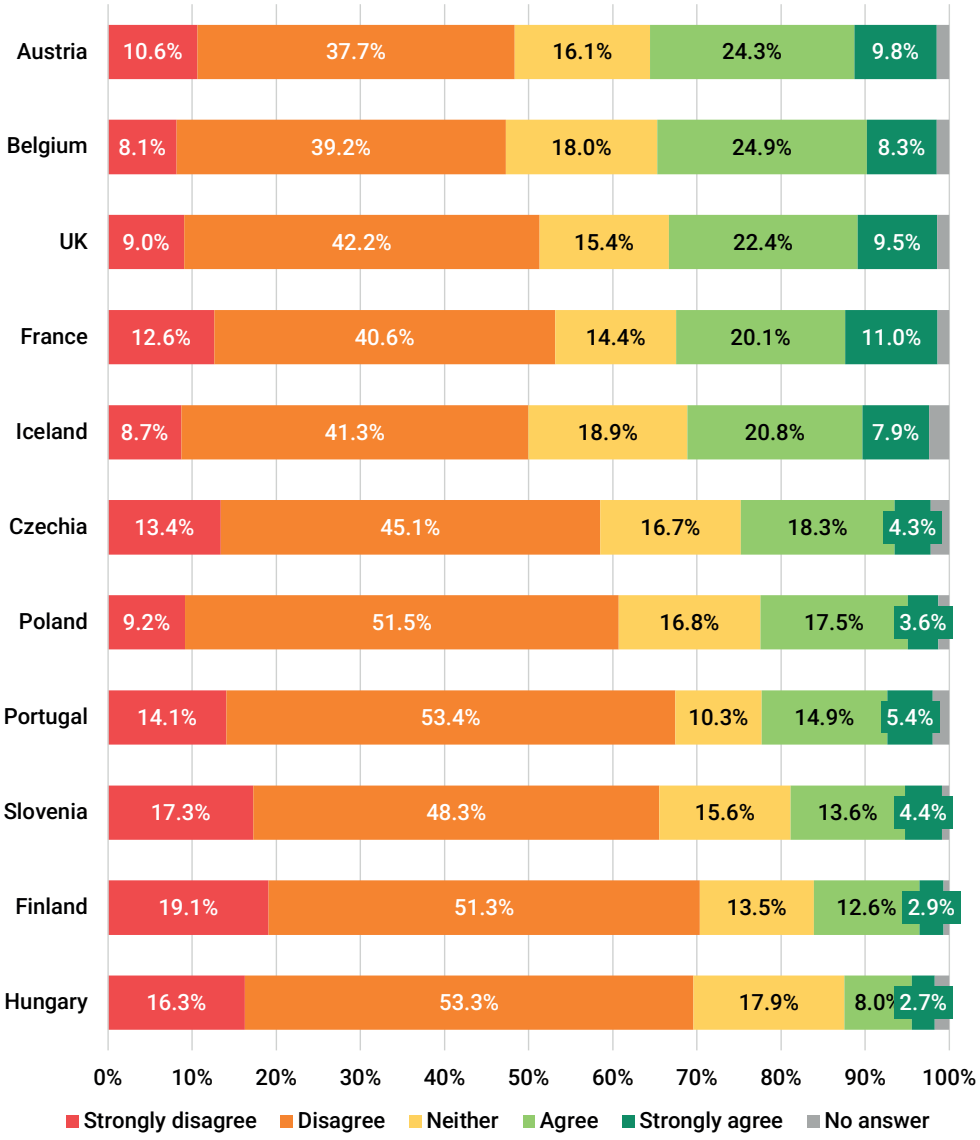
To assess these beliefs, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the statement: "There is no point in doing what I can for the environment unless others do the same."

Figure 4 shows that, across the eleven countries, respondents largely reject the idea that acting alone is entirely pointless. On average, just under two-thirds disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Conversely, only about a quarter agreed with the statement. There are however substantial cross-national differences.

The highest level of disagreement with the statement was observed in Finland (70.4% disagree/ strongly disagree) and Hungary (69.6%), closely followed by Portugal (67.4%) and Slovenia (65.5%). Countries such as Austria (48.3%), Belgium (47.3%), United Kingdom (51.3%), France (53.2%), and Iceland (50%) have the lowest level of disagreement, but this is still relatively high.

Overall, these results suggest that most people reject fatalism about acting alone and maintain a sense that individual actions are meaningful contributions to addressing climate change.

Figure 4. Agreement that "There is no point in doing what I can for the environment unless others do the same" (% by country)



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 2 (2024). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis: w2gq10 (n=10289).

Environment vs the economy

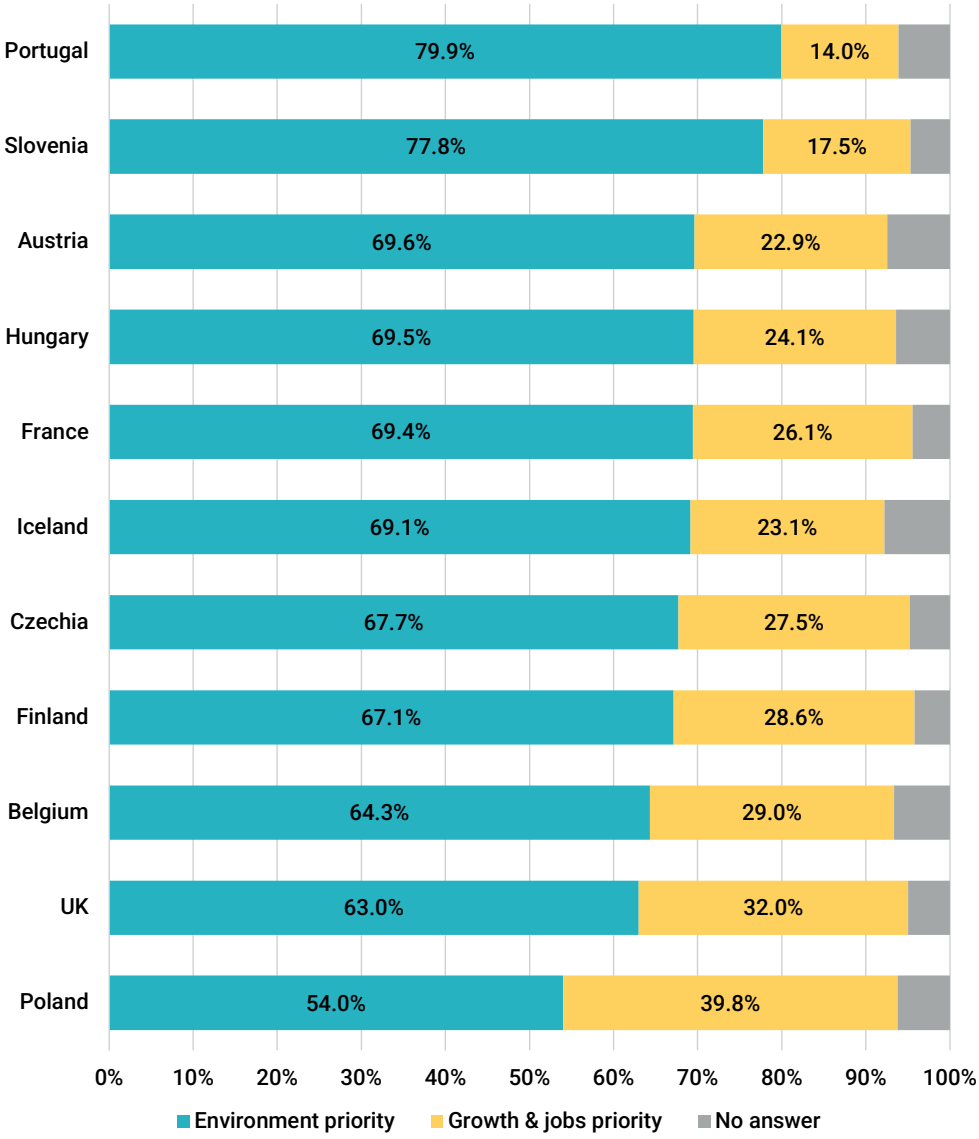
Balancing environmental protection with economic growth remains one of the key policy challenges across Europe. While public concern about climate change and environmental degradation is widespread, attitudes toward environmental protection can be moderated or even superseded by more immediate economic concerns (Sisco et al., 2023), such as the 'cost of living crisis'. As suggested by Inglehart's (1990) postmaterialist values theory, individuals are more likely to prioritise environmental quality once their basic economic and physical needs are met, meaning that support for environmental action may fluctuate with perceptions of economic stability.

The CRONOS3 survey included a question designed to capture this trade-off (see Figure 5), asking respondents whether they believe that protecting the environment should be given priority, even if it causes slower economic growth and some job losses, or whether economic growth and job creation should be prioritised, even if this means some harm to the environment. Across the eleven countries included in the survey, support for prioritising environmental protection remains strong. On average, around three-quarters of respondents stated that protecting the environment should take precedence over economic growth and job creation, while one quarter favoured prioritising economic and employment concerns.

The strongest support for prioritising the environment was found in Portugal (79.9%) and Slovenia (77.8%), indicating a high level of commitment to environmental protection even in the face of potential economic trade-offs. Austria (69.6%), Hungary (69.5%), France (69.4%), and Iceland (69.1%) also exhibited high levels of environmental prioritisation.

These countries demonstrate a relatively consistent public willingness to accept slower economic growth in exchange for protecting the environment. At the other end of the spectrum, a comparatively large minority in Poland (39.8%) expressed the view that economic growth and job creation should take precedence. However, even there, a majority supported prioritising environmental protection over economic growth (54.0%).

Figure 5. Protecting the environment versus economic growth and job creation



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 1 (2024). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis: w1gq12 (n=9324).

Fairness beliefs

Achieving meaningful climate mitigation requires transformative societal change, supported by effective climate policies. Public acceptance of such measures depends not only on concern about climate change but also on perceptions of fairness and legitimacy (Poortinga, 2025).

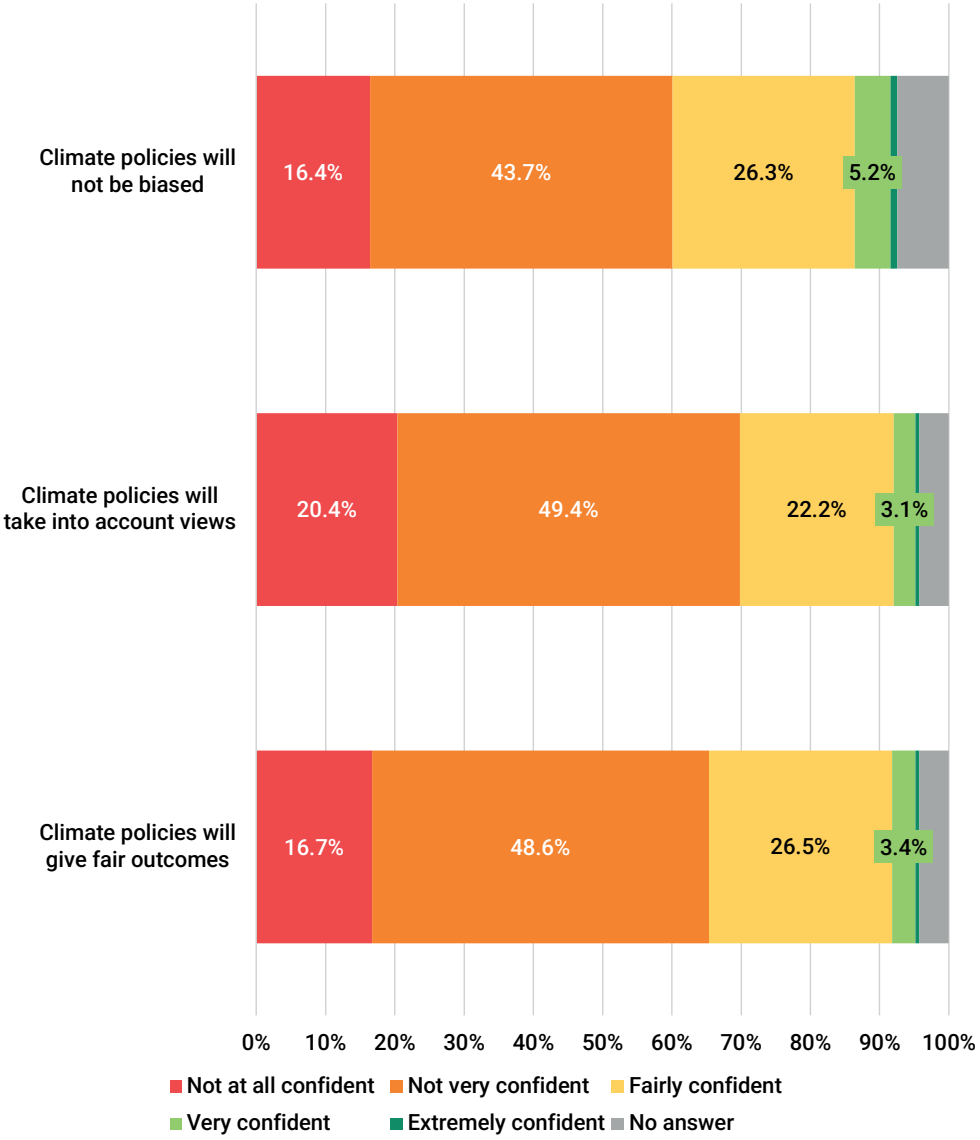
In CRONOS3, respondents were asked how confident they are that national climate policies will (a) not be biased, (b) take into account views of everyone, and (c) give fair outcomes. Responses were given on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 ('not at all confident') to 5 ('extremely confident').

Figure 6 shows that, across the eleven countries, respondents have very low confidence that climate policies will be fair. Around 60.1% expressed little or no confidence that such policies will avoid bias against particular groups, and 65.3% were not confident that they would deliver fair outcomes.

Confidence was lowest regarding whether climate policies will take everyone's views into account, with 69.8% reporting little or no confidence. In contrast, only around 3.7-6.2% expressed high or very high confidence across the three items.

These findings indicate a widespread lack of trust and perceived legitimacy in the fairness of climate policy across Europe, although such evaluations may differ depending on the specific type of policy considered. (Poortinga et al., 2023).

Figure 6. Perceived fairness of climate policies



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 4 (2025). Post-stratification and population weights have been applied for analysis across the eleven countries: w4gq7 (n=9596), w4gq9 (n=9281).

Contributions to Climate Action

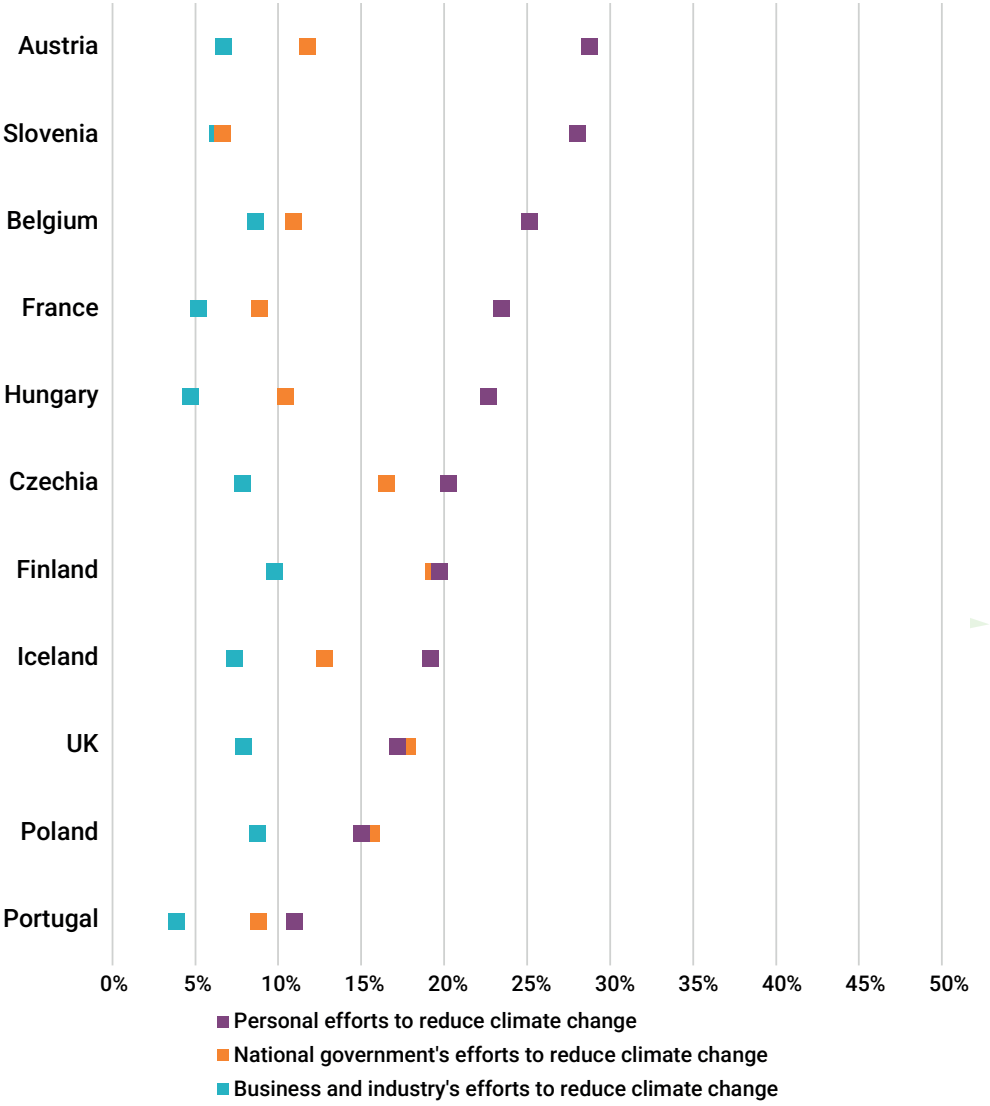
To further explore fairness perceptions, the survey examined whether people believe key societal actors are doing their fair share to address climate change. While respondents attributed considerable responsibility to government, business and industry, and less to individuals, these questions assessed whether each group is seen as acting accordingly. Responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from 1 ('far less than their/my fair share') to 5 ('far more than their/my fair share').

Figure 7 shows that perceived contributions vary considerably across the eleven countries. The proportion of respondents who believe that people like themselves are doing more than their fair share is highest in Austria (28.8%), Slovenia (28.0%), Belgium (25.1%), and Hungary (22.7%), and lowest in Portugal (11.0%).

Perceptions that governments are doing more than their fair share vary less, but still range from 6.6% in Slovenia and 8.8% in Portugal to 19.3% in Finland, with most countries clustering between 10.5% and 17.8%. Business and industry are consistently rated lowest across all countries, with only 3.9-9.8% of respondents believing that they are contributing more than their fair share.

Taken together, the results show a striking asymmetry between perceived responsibility and perceived effort. While Europeans overwhelmingly assign the greatest responsibility for addressing climate change to business and government, they tend to view these actors as doing the least to fulfil their obligations. By contrast, individuals see themselves as less responsible but as contributing relatively more to climate action, even if still at a modest level (11.0-28.8%).

Figure 7. Perceived contributions to reduce climate change



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 4 (2025). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis: w4gq3 (n=9678), w4gq5 (n=9526).

Policy support and action

Climate policy support

To assess public preferences for different types of environmental policies to mitigate climate change, respondents were asked to what extent they are in favour of or against: (1) increasing taxes on fossil fuels such as oil, gas, and coal; (2) using public money to subsidise renewable energy such as wind and solar power; and (3) introducing a law banning the sale of the least energy-efficient household appliances. These measures represent different 'push' and 'pull' approaches for decarbonising the energy supply, alongside regulatory action to reduce energy demand (Poortinga, 2025).

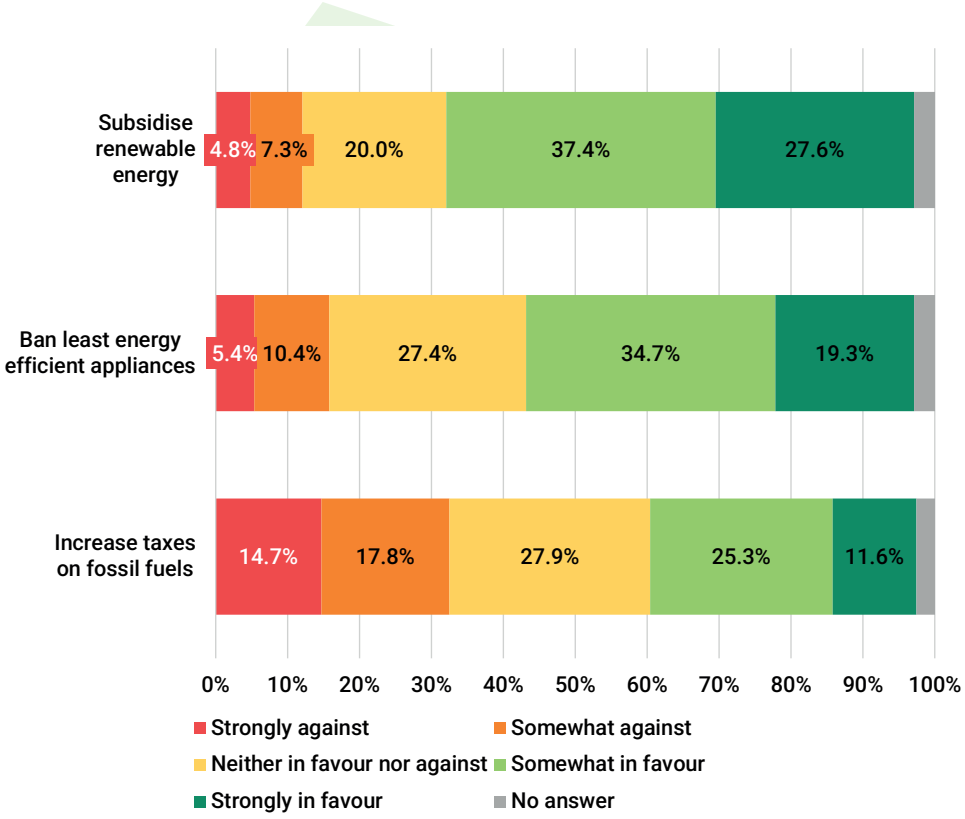
Figure 8 shows that support levels differ markedly across the three policy types. The most popular measure, by a substantial margin, is the use of public money to subsidise renewable energy, with 65.0% of respondents from the eleven countries somewhat or strongly in favour, and only 12.1% somewhat or strongly against. However, this represents a decrease of 10 percentage points compared with support for the same policy across the EU/EFTA area in 2016-17 (Poortinga et al., 2018).

Support for banning the least energy-efficient appliances is more moderate but remains positive overall: 53.9% are somewhat or strongly in favour, and 15.8% are against. These results suggest broad acceptance of regulatory measures, though some uncertainty persists, possibly reflecting concerns about cost, enforcement, or fairness. These figures are largely consistent with support levels observed across the EU/EFTA area in 2016-17 (Poortinga et al., 2018).

In contrast, increasing taxes on fossil fuels remains a more divisive policy, with 37.0% of respondents somewhat or strongly in favour and 32.5% somewhat or strongly against. This near-even split highlights continuing reservations about tax-based approaches, which are often viewed as regressive or unfair (Poortinga, 2025). Interestingly, the results indicate a modest positive shift since 2016-17, when only 30.3% were in favour of higher fuel taxes and 44.0% against (Poortinga et al., 2018).

Overall, these results confirm a well-established pattern in European attitudes towards climate policy: non-coercive 'pull' measures ('carrots') are preferred over more restrictive 'push' measures ('sticks'). Public support is strongest when policies are perceived as enabling or rewarding sustainable choices rather than penalising consumption.

Figure 8. Public support for climate policies



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 1 (2024). Post-stratification and population weights have been applied for analysis across the eleven countries: w1gq13 (n=9630), w1gq15 (n=9596).

Policy support and action

Climate activism

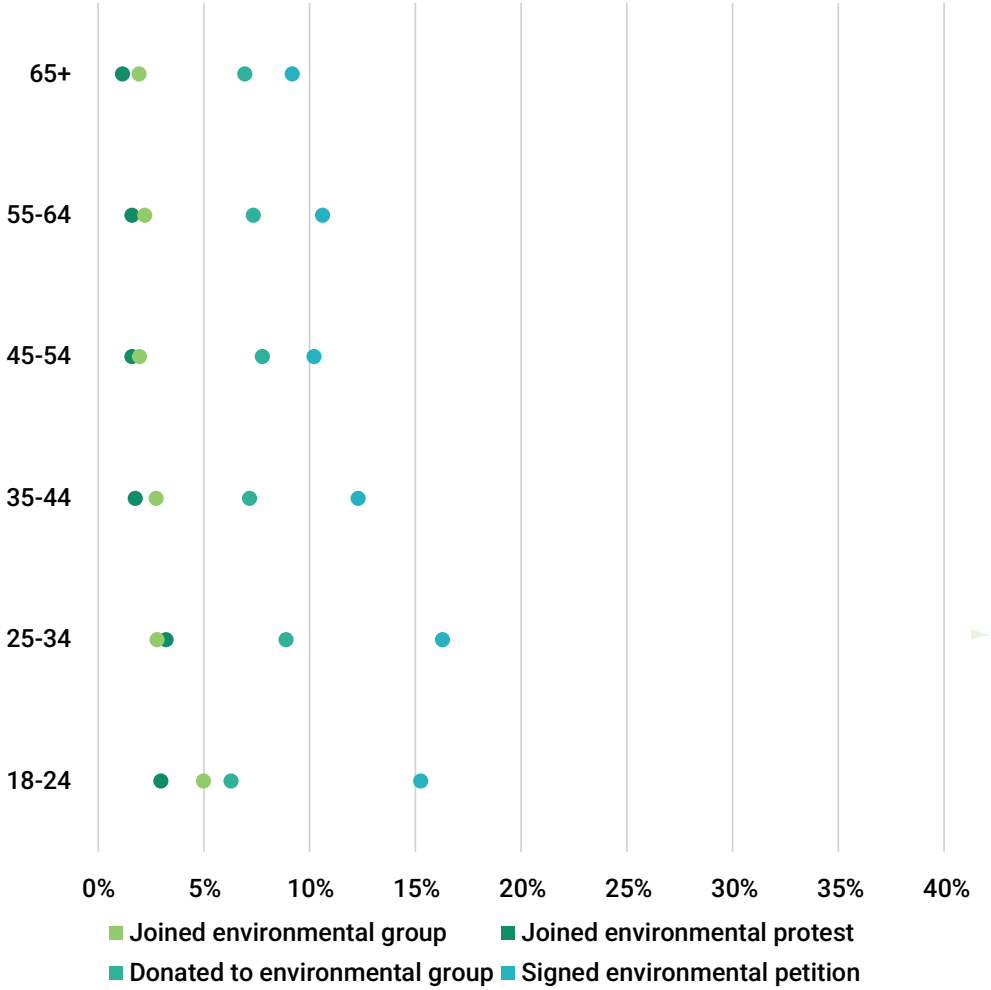
While policy preferences show public support across different government policies to address climate change, they capture only one dimension of engagement. To better understand the extent to which concern about climate change translates into personal action, the survey also examined people's involvement in public-sphere environmental behaviours, actions taken in civic or collective settings to advocate for environmental causes.

Respondents were asked about their participation in four key activities over the past five years: signing petitions about environmental issues, donating money to environmental groups, taking part in protests or demonstrations about environmental issues, and joining an environmental group. They were also asked whether they are currently members of any group whose main aim is to preserve or protect the environment.

Figure 9 shows that public-sphere environmental behaviours remain relatively limited across the population in the eleven CRONOS3 countries, with clear variation in the types of activities people engage in. Signing petitions is by far the most common form of environmental action, with 9.2-16.3% of respondents having done so in the past five years, followed by donating to environmental organisations (6.3-8.9%). Joining environmental groups (1.9-5.0%) and participating in protests (1.1-3.2%) are the least common actions.

Young adults (18-34) show the highest overall engagement across most activities. Those aged 25-34 are most likely to sign petitions (16.3%) and donate to environmental groups (8.9%), while the youngest cohort (18-24) shows relatively high rates of petition signing (15.3%) and stands out as the most likely to join environmental groups (5.0%) and participate in protests (3.0%). The results further show that public-sphere environmental behaviours decline with age. While petition signing and donation rates remain fairly stable among middle-aged (35-54) and older adults (55+), more active forms of participation drop notably. Older adults (55+) have the lowest levels of environmental activism across most activities, showing that more activist forms of environmental action may be particularly concentrated among younger generations.

Figure 9: Climate activism by age group



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 3 (2024). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis: w3gq17 (n=10031).

Policy support and action

Willingness to pay

Respondents were further asked how willing they are to make sacrifices to protect the environment, including paying much higher prices, paying much higher taxes, and accepting reductions in their standard of living. Responses were measured on a five-point scale ranging from "very willing" to "very unwilling."

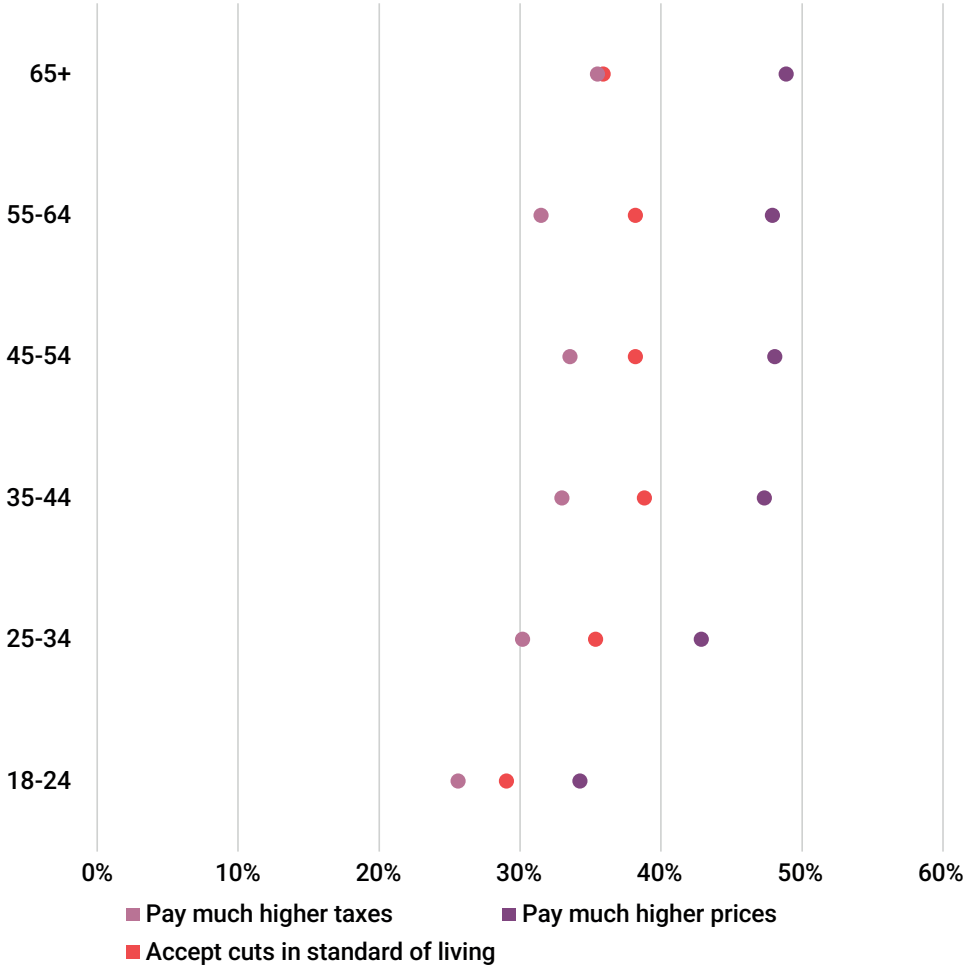
Figure 10 shows that willingness to bear such costs is moderate overall, with clear differences across both cost type and age group. Paying higher prices emerges as the most acceptable form of contribution, with between 34.3% and 48.9% of respondents indicating they are fairly or very willing to do so. Acceptance of reductions in living standards follows (29.0-38.8%), while willingness to pay higher taxes is lowest (25.6-35.5%).

Younger adults (18-24) are the least willing to pay much higher prices (34.3%), accept cuts to living standards (29.0%), or pay much higher taxes (25.6%) for environmental protection.

Willingness increases with age but remains fairly stable among those aged 35 and over: around 47.3-48.9% are willing to pay much higher prices, 35.9-38.8% to accept cuts to living standards, and 31.5-35.5% to pay much higher taxes.

These patterns suggest that middle-aged and older cohorts show greater willingness to contribute financially to environmental protection, although the results may reflect higher incomes and living standards that enable them to absorb costs more easily.

Figure 10. Willingness to pay for environmental protection by age group



Source: CRONOS-3, Wave 3 (2025). Post-stratification weights have been applied for country level analysis: w1gq16 (n=9644), w1gq18 (n=9615).

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Conclusion

The Make it Green questions included on the CRONOS3 survey provide comprehensive insights into how Europeans across eleven countries perceive climate change, evaluate fairness, and engage with climate action. The results show a promising but cautious foundation for climate policy: belief in climate change is near universal, yet emotional engagement, perceptions of fairness, and willingness to act vary considerably across countries and social groups.

Europeans overwhelmingly accept that the climate is changing and that their countries are already feeling its effects. Yet the intensity of worry is substantially lower than this level of belief would suggest: while over 90% accept climate change is happening, only around 40% report being very or extremely worried about it. Concern is highest in Southern Europe (especially Portugal) and parts of Central Europe (notably Austria and Hungary), but more moderate in Northern and Eastern countries such as Iceland and Poland. This gap between cognitive acceptance and emotional urgency suggests that, while people acknowledge climate change as real, they may not feel the sustained sense of alarm necessary to drive large-scale personal behaviour change.

Europeans are clear about who should lead on climate change: business and industry are seen as most responsible for reducing climate change, followed by national governments. Individuals view themselves as more secondary actors.

Nonetheless, most Europeans reject fatalism about acting alone, with around two-thirds disagreeing that there is no point in personal action unless others contribute. This suggests Europeans hold institutional leaders accountable while maintaining some sense of personal agency regarding environmental action. Given that

business and industry are viewed as key actors, these findings also underline the importance of policies that incentivise and enable companies to reduce their emissions and adopt sustainable practices.

When balancing environmental protection against economic growth, about three-quarters of Europeans prioritise the environment, even at the cost of slower growth or job losses. Support is strongest in countries that show the highest level of worry about climate change (such as Portugal, Slovenia, Austria, and Hungary), while a number of Eastern European countries show more divided opinion, with economic concerns carrying greater weight. These patterns are likely to reflect differences in economic conditions and dependencies.

A major finding is the widespread perception that climate policies lack fairness. Across the eleven countries, very few citizens express confidence that future climate policies will be unbiased, inclusive, or deliver fair outcomes. In addition, most believe that governments and businesses are not yet doing their fair share. This 'fairness gap' between perceived responsibility and perceived contributions creates a significant barrier: citizens see the burden of climate mitigation as unevenly distributed, with major actors failing to pull their weight. Unless stronger leadership is demonstrated, this perceived unfairness risks undermining public support for more ambitious climate measures.

Despite concerns about fairness, Europeans show selective but meaningful support for climate policies. Incentive-based 'pull' policies, such as subsidies for renewables, enjoy broad approval (65% in favour), while regulatory measures receive moderate backing. Tax-based climate policies remain divisive, with public opinion on fossil-fuel taxes nearly evenly split.

This pattern shows the need for climate strategies that are not only effective but also perceived as enabling rather than restrictive (Poortinga, 2025).

In terms of personal action, engagement varies by type and age. Public-sphere actions (such as signing petitions, donating to environmental groups, and participating in protests) remain relatively rare and are concentrated in younger adults. Willingness to bear financial costs for environmental protection is moderate, with around one-third to one-half of people willing to accept higher prices or lower living standards, with slightly higher levels among older adults.

This suggests complementary but distinct forms of climate engagement across generations: while older adults show greater willingness to make financial or lifestyle adjustments, younger cohorts are more inclined toward collective action.

Overall, the results show solid but conditional public support for climate action in the eleven CRONOS3 countries. While belief in climate change is almost universal, and environmental protection remains a widely shared value, this may not necessarily translate into tangible actions and/or policy support.

There are major doubts about the fairness of climate policy, and the main responsible actors are not necessarily seen as pulling their weight. While people are willing to contribute, and make modest sacrifices, they expect governments and businesses to lead with credible, equitable action. Without such leadership, public trust and willingness to support ambitious policies may be undermined by perceptions that the collective burden of climate mitigation is unevenly shared.

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STRONG
EQUAL

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