

KONTEXT REPORT

European Forum Alpbach 2025 Climate Track Report: Finding Common Ground

Austria in Europe Days

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The following report includes statements made by speakers and participants during the sessions. These statements do not necessarily reflect the views of KONTEXT, may be incomplete, contested, or refer to the session context. We encourage you to view them as points of inspiration and engage in your own process of interpretation and sense making.

1. Introduction

In recent years, public and political attention has increasingly shifted towards a range of various crises, pushing the impending consequences of the climate crisis down the political agenda. As a result, the value and potential of climate action for addressing these interconnected challenges is frequently overlooked — from energy independence, resilient supply chains, to green jobs and competitiveness through clean technologies. Instead of recognizing synergies, economic prosperity and security are often framed in opposition to ambitious climate policy, fostering division and polarization. At the same time, disinformation is on the rise, which further slows down political progress. This makes it harder to lead informed debates and build the common ground needed to take effective action. The **European Forum Alpbach 2025 (EFA25)** is not spared by these broader societal dynamics. As reporting partners for the climate track, KONTEXT Institute for Climate Matters therefore seeks not only to document and make sense of the complexity of the sessions in Alpbach, but also to analyse where and why these opposing dynamics emerge. In addition, this report highlights moments where the climate crisis was seriously dealt with and people engaged constructively and where efforts were made to reduce polarization. We see these moments as essential for dissolving divisions and, ultimately, as a key for a constructive dialogue, finding shared solutions and acting on them.

The EFA25 took place under the overarching theme of ‘Recharge Europe,’ highlighting Europe’s urgent need to renew its potential by advancing climate action, innovation, democracy, and security. During the Austria in Europe days, the climate track focused on energy and climate policy and featured a multitude of sessions, hikes, book talks and various networking events. A broad range of topics was discussed, with speakers from around the world representing diverse institutions and areas of expertise. This year, many sessions focused on navigating and dissolving perceived opposites in climate policy, such as reaching climate neutrality while staying internationally competitive in different industries or investing in and benefitting from the transition.

Equally, the necessity of our economic system to incorporate ecological boundaries, and the need to adapt all societal systems for the coming decades was widely discussed. At the same time, participants and panellists reflected on challenges in implementing planned climate policies, a perceived backlash, and the lack of positive visions for Austria and the European Union. Despite these challenges, several discussions emphasized the importance of regaining hope and not lose the ‘race against despair’. Some debates resulted in concrete solutions, backed by institutional and company-level perspectives, helping to understand current struggles and highlighting the potential and added value of ambitious measures in climate action.

The following paragraphs provide an overview of the key insights from the main climate track sessions held during the Austria in Europe Days. This will be followed by a more detailed analysis of the discourse within the individual discussions.

The key takeaways of the central climate track sessions

In the hike **A Union of People and Generations: Teaming Up for Europe's Green Future** the key insight was that impact emerges over time, through many people and phases working together. From children's rights opening the door to climate litigation, to seniors setting new legal precedents before the European Court of Justice. What looks like a setback in one moment can, for instance, surface crucial documents, shift the discourse, or even lay the foundation for a legal breakthrough that only appears years later. While well-being and climate protection acts are already embedded in institutions and new rights continue to be won, a crucial lever for effective climate action is their enforcement. Different generations can thus reinforce one another and amplify their collective impact.

The session **Energy Without Borders: Building Europe's Clean Powerhouse** highlighted that building a truly interconnected European energy system requires more than just expanding renewables. Security of supply, grid integration and faster permitting emerged as urgent priorities, alongside greater cross-border cooperation and inclusion of non-EU neighbours. Speakers stressed that the transition must be business-driven yet people-centred: investments should look forward, not backward and public buy-in depends on making energy tangible in daily life. At the same time, the global justice dimension cannot be ignored, as the massive demand for critical minerals risks reinforcing existing inequalities.

The session **Making European Climate Action Great Again: A Culture Shock** at the European Forum Alpbach 2025 examined how to revive climate action as public attention wanes. Participants stressed that fear-based narratives can paralyze, while hope fosters engagement. Climate communication should respect cultural and value diversity, acknowledging despair yet cultivating 'radical hope' in possible futures. At the same time, countering disinformation and deliberate obstruction from far-right politics

and fossil industries is essential. Ultimately, climate action must be framed as an inclusive, participatory movement that empowers people through tailored, hope-driven messages rather than intimidation.

In **A Food, Water and Nature Union: Europe's Survival Plan**, the panel explored how agriculture, water management, and nature restoration are deeply interconnected and vital for securing Europe's food systems and biodiversity. They highlighted the urgent need to restore disrupted water cycles, which increasingly trigger prolonged droughts, flash floods, and land-use challenges that threaten both farmers and ecosystems. Protecting and replenishing groundwater, alongside nature-based solutions to reduce urban heat, emerged as key strategies. Investments in water and land stewardship not only support adaptation but also provide economic returns. Turning these visions into action, bridging political silos, and aligning human development with ecosystem health are crucial for Europe's sustainable future.

In the hike **A Green Industrial Policy for Europe's Future**, the discussion highlighted how a Green Industrial Deal could shape Europe's competitiveness and climate action by promoting sustainable industries and innovation. Sustainability is no longer optional, and early action offers a competitive edge, yet the transition must protect those most affected. One conclusion of the session was that effective implementation requires not only clear regulatory frameworks but also coordinated public and private investments, especially in emerging green technologies. Furthermore, key solutions to align profitability with sustainability are addressing market timing barriers, ensuring affordable and reliable energy and translating innovative ideas into large-scale execution. In this context, long-term strategies are crucial to bridge the gap between policy goals and industrial practice

In general, however, climate debates are marked by complexity, political interests, economic motives, and emotional charge, which provide a basis for the spread of disinformation and polarization. To accelerate constructive, determined climate policy and, at the same time, to strengthen democratic discourse, the KONTEXT Institute for Climate Matters, presented the 'KONTEXT Common Ground Check' during EFA25. This tool serves as a guideline for various communication formats, aiming to strengthen constructive discourse rather than deepen divides. It can be applied in discussions, analyses and media contributions.

It sets out four core elements that define constructive discourse that fosters action and serves as orientation in any debate, analysis or argument: providing clarity in complex debates, communicating in a depolarizing way, recognizing needs and finding common ground, and offering solutions that empower action. At the same time, it highlights risks to avoid in (climate) debates, such as false balance, incrementalism, blurred positions, or the suppression of necessary controversy.

In this Climate Track Report, we analyse to what extent debates at EFA25 reflected these principles, how speakers dealt with the related risks and how the principles were applied. We highlight what they enabled in the debates and what they can contribute more broadly, to show how constructive discourse can be fostered – in Alpbach and beyond. The results are being presented in four different sections, analogous to the four key principles of the KONTEXT Common Ground Check.

The KONTEXT Common Ground Check

The KONTEXT Common Ground Check is structured on four key elements:

- **Provide clarity.** Complex debates are easily clouded by jargon, competing narratives or deliberate delays of actions. Providing clarity means breaking issues down without oversimplifying and showing how individual issues connect to larger contexts. Beyond that, it involves exposing power imbalances, underlying interests and delaying tactics.
- **Communicate in a depolarizing way.** This is crucial to keep criticism focused on arguments rather than people, foster mutual respect and prevent divides from deepening. It requires balancing factual accuracy with an empathetic tone, withholding personal attacks or dismissive language, and refraining from divisive terms. It also means promoting differentiation over simplification, exaggeration or black-and-white thinking and recognizing that complex issues require nuanced consideration.
- **Recognize needs and find common ground.** Debates often overlook lived realities as well as different experiences and values. Recognizing different backgrounds and perspectives makes it possible to identify shared values and overlapping concerns to build the foundation for joint action. Common ground does not mean erasing differences, but favouring communalities over divisions, turning debates into bridge-building for collective progress.
- **Offer real solutions and empower action.** Discussions often stall when they remain abstract. Empowerment means showing where action is possible, highlighting opportunities and communicating benefits clearly. Solutions should be evidence-based and illustrated with tangible examples. To this end, it is vital to accept responsibility by acknowledging what is expected from oneself and others.

Alongside its potential, seeking common ground may also carry certain risks. It is therefore important to remain mindful of these and to avoid them if possible.

■ Firstly, it is crucial to **avoid false balance**. This happens when positions with very different levels of evidence are presented as if they were equally valid. For example, placing the scientific consensus on man-made global heating on the same level as opinions that suggest its denial creates a misleading impression of symmetry. Common ground should be sought without relativizing established facts or ethical principles.

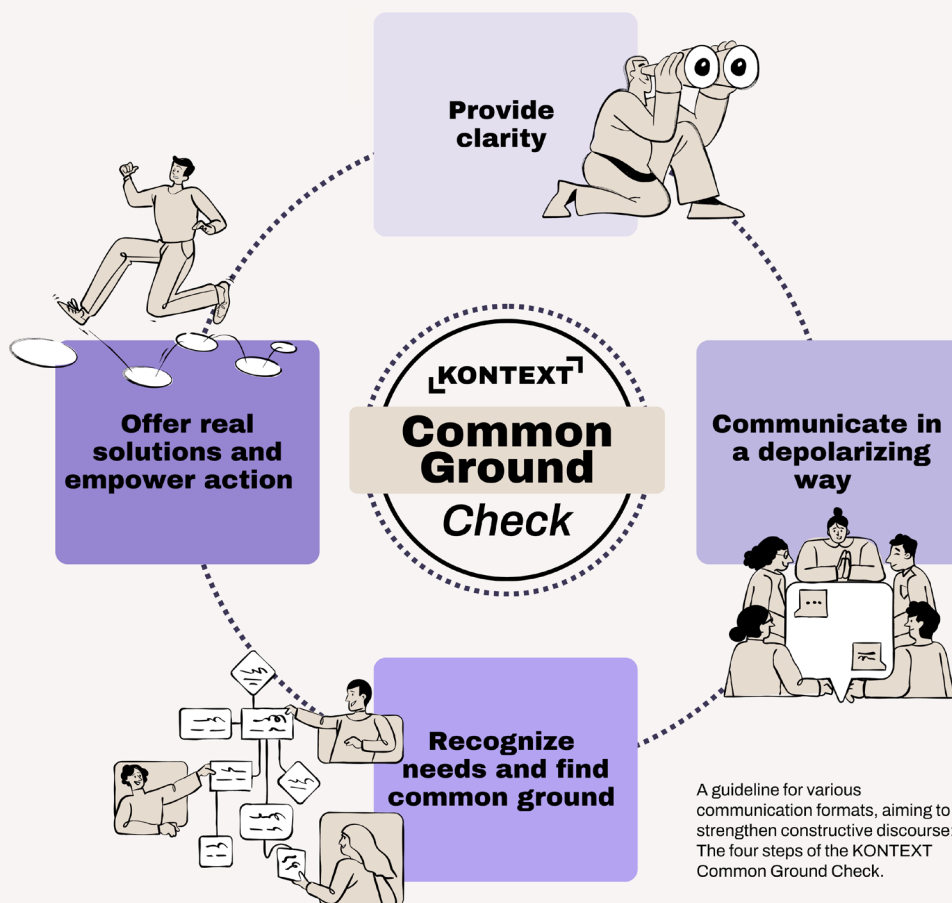
■ Secondly, it is important to **avoid incrementalism**. In the search for consensus, debates can slide into compromises that reflect only the smallest common denominator. While this may ease conflict in the short run, it risks delaying or weakening the ambitious steps needed. Especially in climate policy, debates must create room for shared solutions that can foster systemic change.

■ Thirdly, it is necessary to **stay clear**. Empathy and bridge-building matter, but arguments that are too cautious or overly nuanced risk fading into the background of public debate. Since media and

political arenas tend to reward sharp contrasts and striking messages, constructive voices must articulate necessary measures and priorities with clarity and determination to remain visible.

■ Fourthly, it is vital to **stay on track**. In polarized debates, there is often the temptation either to smooth over differences to over-accommodate for harmony or to escalate into confrontation. Both can dilute principles and weaken credibility. Staying on track means holding to core convictions with discipline and consistency, even when the dynamics of the debate push in other directions.

■ Finally, it is essential to **allow for constructive controversy**. Democracy is built on the appreciation of opposing views and the ability, through debates, to sharpen arguments and generate new ideas. Depolarization should not erase conflict but instead create space for differences to be addressed openly and productively. Healthy debates can embrace tension while still moving towards solutions.



Provide clarity

2.1 Clarify complex issues and explain broader contexts

Providing clarity is the first step towards fostering constructive discussions about the climate crisis and its effects on our daily lives. Complex issues should be communicated in a way that is easy to understand, while explaining the broader context helps to establish a shared foundation for an informed and knowledge-aligned dialogue from the very beginning. Providing clarity also involves identifying the various interests and positions behind different arguments that shape the climate debate, as these interests influence both the direction and outcome of discussions. The wide range of topics addressed at EFA25 illustrated the underlying need for clear and fact-based communication.

One topic that repeatedly emerged as central theme within the climate track was the debate over the compatibility – or, more precisely, the perceived contradiction – between competitiveness and the socio-ecological transition. Numerous studies demonstrate that ecological transformation holds vast potential for both economic prosperity and social well-being (cf. [Vu et al. \(2024\)](#)). Throughout these discussions, several contributions by panellists and participants helped to cut through confusion and clarify misconceptions. By drawing on science- and fact-based approaches as well as concrete practical examples, they offered valuable insights that highlighted the pathways towards aligning competitiveness with advancing in climate action. [Sigrid Stagl \(Climate Economist, Vienna University of Economics and Business\)](#) for instance, pointed out the underlying issue at the core of this discussion, by taking it a step back: the way we model, quantify and evaluate our current economic system. Drawing on her expertise as an ecological economist, she explained that how we measure competitiveness is based on an economic model that does not account for biodiversity, greenhouse gas emissions, or natural resource constraints. As a result, also competitiveness is assessed using a

limited and non-holistic framework. Stagl made clear that a well-functioning economy depends on a healthy society and ecosystem, and that these cannot be separated. To address this, she argued for integrating biophysical dimensions into economic models, stressing that any discussion of competitiveness without these dimensions is biased from the outset. In a related session, she noted that in this context, while market forces are the primary drivers of our current system, they must be guided by the necessary rules that take these boundaries into account. Currently, many of these rules are still shaped by conditions and assumptions from the past. By linking the discussion on competitiveness to scientific findings about the underlying economic system, she was able to allow for a clear and fact-driven dialogue.

Similarly, [Michael Strugl \(CEO, Verbund AG\)](#), emphasized that combining green initiatives with competitiveness is entirely possible, via providing concrete examples: He noted that China, when measured by GDP, invests twice as much in clean technology as the EU and also reaps greater benefits, underlining that advancing the transition and being competitive is not a contradiction. Strugl further highlighted the costs of inaction: Without decisive measures on climate change, significant adaptation expenses are unavoidable. At the same time, expanding renewable energy increases independence while meeting energy demand, delivering benefits for both the climate and the economy. He stressed that securing stable investment conditions is crucial, as this enables the scaling up of clean technologies and the creation of long-term economic opportunities. While China is advancing rapidly, he stated, Europe remains competitive in certain markets. Ultimately, ‘it’s about implementation, not about accelerating the goals. There is no silver bullet: We need to lower energy costs, which includes addressing the persistent gap with the energy prices in the US and accelerating electrification.’ Using these arguments, he contextualized the debate further and highlighted the advantages

of the ecological transition through more practical cases, making them more tangible, while dissolving misconceptions and delaying narratives. Building on this, [Frank Schuster](#) (Head, European Investment Bank Group Office in Austria) highlighted the strategic risks posed by dependencies, citing Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine and its effect on energy prices as an example. In the short term, he argued, Europe must diversify its dependencies, while long-term solutions should focus on expanding renewable energy and phasing out fossil fuels. Although Europe excels in technological inventions and patents, much of production has shifted abroad, making domestic scaling essential. Schuster also noted the strong interest from international investors in green bonds, but emphasized that attracting private capital requires stable, unified investment frameworks, such as a single European capital market.

In another session, [Gernot Wagner](#) (Climate Economist, Columbia Business School) aligned with these views. He pointed out that other countries are increasingly leapfrogging Europe in clean technology. While Europe continues to lead in inventing new technologies and many initiatives are progressing well, Wagner emphasized that 'it's not only about inventing new things, but also about implementing them.' Building on these perspectives, [Jessika Roswall](#) (European Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy, European Commission) added that although actively pursuing climate action and emerging green industries inevitably entails short-term costs, these measures must be seen as part of a long-term investment strategy. Supporting green industries in Europe, she argued, is fully compatible with competitiveness and necessary both at European and global levels. At the same time, she acknowledged the practical challenges: Scaling up remains difficult, many stakeholders continue to view investments primarily as costs, and political silos within institutions can impede coordinated action. As – according to the KONTEXT Common Ground Check – effective solutions arise from the capacity to craft approaches that consider diverse perspectives, these arguments provide a holistic view of the

debate on competitive industries and climate politics. They reinforce that advancing climate action is a prerequisite for competitiveness, but it requires persistence and a long-term perspective. At the same time, the central conclusion of the panellists named was a message of hope: Despite the challenges ahead, it is still not too late to act.

Another session featured [Sophie Howe](#) (Director, Sophie Howe Associates Ltd., Former and First future generations commissioner for Wales) who highlighted the shortcomings of our current economic indicators in reflecting the comprehensive benefits of an ecological transition. By drawing on examples from the Welsh infrastructure sector, she advocated for a broader understanding that goes beyond GDP to include low-carbon development, resilience, and efficient resource use. Building on this approach, Howe gave insights on the so-called *Well-being of Future Generations Act*, which she successfully implemented. It includes seven goals, set to provide a shared vision for the public bodies to work towards, and ultimately broadening the conception of prosperity besides 'traditional' economic indicators. According to Howe, looking at infrastructure projects with this conception made it clear that certain projects – such as the construction and expansion of new motorways – do not genuinely contribute to the well-being of Wales and were ultimately not pursued. Other projects served the same function of providing mobility, while also being beneficial in other areas. This example clearly demonstrates how acknowledging ecological boundaries within our economic framework can reduce the perceived complexity of the system.

A very different topic in one of the sessions focused on a 'Food, Water and Nature Union,' bringing the discussion back to the direct impacts of climate change on ecosystems. Even though this debate was distinct from the broader economic discussions named above, it demonstrated that a fact-based approach is key to finding common ground and guiding the way towards effective solutions also within other discussions. In his opening statement, [Nick Steiner](#) (Water Cycle Restoration Practitioner, Water Stories) emphasized the critical importance of a functioning water cycle. He

argued that reducing water use is not sufficient; Europe's disrupted water cycles must be actively restored. Throughout the session, it became evident that a functioning water cycle is one of the most crucial factors to safeguard a sustainable and liveable future. However, it often receives less attention compared to discussions on food security and other topics within the agricultural sector. By explaining the broader significance and, more importantly, the consequences of a (non-)functional water cycle, Steiner clarified this misconception. He outlined the mounting challenges for farmers as rainfall patterns become increasingly unpredictable, with prolonged droughts followed by intense, destructive rains, exacerbating fires and soil erosion. Drawing a vivid parallel to economic debates, he compared the Earth's groundwater resources to a bank account from which we continually withdraw without replenishing. He emphasized that even simple, low-cost measures can produce substantial impacts and offer strong returns on investment.

2.2 Expose delaying strategies and reveal disinformation

Besides clarifying complex issues, providing clarity also means actively working against delay strategies for climate action. Only if we manage to distinguish effective solutions from distracting ones our actions result in impactful outcomes.

In this context, one session examined the highly debated topic of hydrogen use cases. A recurring narrative of 'technological openness' continues to assign hydrogen a far greater role than is justified within the socio-ecological transition. There is broad scientific consensus that hydrogen use is significantly less efficient than other available options. In the heating sector, for example, heat pumps can be up to five times more efficient than hydrogen, while in transportation, electric mobility achieves even higher levels of efficiency (cf. Frühwald et al. (2024)). Nevertheless, hydrogen can play an important role in sectors where no viable alternatives exist and where it has the greatest potential to reduce emissions, such as specific segments of industrial production.

In contrast, promoting hydrogen in sectors where the scientific consensus clearly favours other solutions may reflect competing interests, ultimately delaying decisive and effective climate action. In the session mentioned, the panellists worked to challenge these narratives as delaying strategies and provided clarity through exposing them in different ways. Michael Richter (Deputy Area Manager Green Energy & Industry, HyCentA Research) and Sigrid Stagl, for example, emphasized the substantial energy losses associated with hydrogen production. In line with Sabine Herlitschka (CEO, Infineon Technologies Austria) it was added that while hydrogen will indeed play an important role, this should be limited to specific, strategically prioritized sectors like energy-intensive industries and not be used as an excuse to weaken transformative processes in different sectors, like domestic heating or private transport (as outlined in Austria's national hydrogen strategy). The discussion also touched on the production of hydrogen outside of Europe, raising concerns about modern forms of colonialism and the risks of new geopolitical dependencies, providing a holistic, clear perspective on the topic and the delaying arguments behind it.

On a meta level, Clover Hogan (Founder & Climate Activist, Force of Nature) addressed the delaying strategies deployed by industries such as the fossil fuel sector, as well as by the globally growing authoritarian movements. She highlighted the growing concentration of power and its far-reaching influence, emphasizing how these actors shape public perception by controlling key narratives through their ownership of and influence over media. According to Hogan, they rely on several tactics: first, creating scapegoats to distract the public – for example, through divisive debates around immigration or climate change denial. Second, vilifying those who challenge their power, such as labelling activists as communists and delegitimizing political opponents. Third, supporting politicians who act as their mouthpieces by amplifying populist narratives. She stressed that, when dealing with disinformation, exposing these strategies is key to understanding the underlying motives and creating counternarratives and policies.

When seeking to provide clarity and establish a foundation for common ground, discussants must also be aware of certain risks. According to the KONTEXT Common Ground Check, one of the most significant risks is falling into incrementalism. Placing too much emphasis on depolarization and consensus-building can result in solutions based on the lowest common denominator. Consequently, necessary but controversial changes may be watered down or never initiated, as they are perceived to be too far removed from a supposedly neutral middle ground. In political and societal contexts, this dynamic can lead to progressive or transformative solutions being labelled as 'too extreme' and sacrificed in favour of compromises that face less resistance but ultimately lack effectiveness. This tendency became apparent during the two-day lab '10x100 Large-Scale Organising for Transformative Regeneration across Cities & Bioregions.' The participants, among other things, identified a deeper narrative on the institutional delay of climate action. They agreed that there is widespread institutional paralysis and denial of the catastrophic impacts of the climate crisis, despite decades of warnings. At the same time, however, they criticized an economic system that fails to recognize ecological boundaries and a political system that uses the lowest common denominator, small-scale projects and shallow policies as flagship for a socio-ecological transition. To mitigate this risk, a more nuanced approach is required – one that remains open to compromise where it is constructive yet is equally prepared to advocate decisively for fundamental change.

Communicate in a depolarizing way

3.1 Refrain from divisive language and use a factual and empathetic tone

Depolarizing polarized debates requires careful use of language and emotions. A factual yet empathetic tone and avoiding divisive terms can prevent escalation. Rather than framing issues as ‘either-or,’ it is more constructive to embrace a ‘both-and’ perspective. This means fostering nuance instead of simplification or exaggeration, as polarization thrives on black-and-white thinking while complex issues demand differentiated views.

A first step towards fostering an empathetic tone and avoiding divisive language can be to pause and reflect before expressing our initial thoughts. In a session on the need – and immense potential – for different generations to work together in climate action and policy, moderator [Ivo Degen](#) (Co-Founder, [Climate farmers](#)) introduced a simple exercise to illustrate this point. He invited all participants to sit in silence for 30 seconds and reflect on what kind of world they want to see and help create. Such brief moments of reflection can help individuals gain perspective on their own position and mindset before entering a discussion or debate.

More concrete examples of depolarizing communication emerged in other sessions as well. In a discussion on competitiveness, [Frank Niederländer](#) (Vice President Government Affairs Europe, [BMW Group](#)) offered a constructive and nuanced perspective during the particularly heated debate on the transformation of the transport sector, specifically regarding the potential crisis facing the (electric) vehicle industry. In many cases, societal discourse tends to assign blame to those perceived as not acting ‘correctly’ in climate action. In this instance, individuals who continue using fossil-fuel vehicles

rather than switching to electric or other alternative modes of transport. However, the electric vehicle market is still in its early stages, and essential infrastructure, including charging stations, has yet to be fully developed. In this context, Niederländer succeeded in both defusing the tension and lifting the discussion to a meta-level, explaining the underlying dynamics in a constructive way. He emphasized the importance of timing when introducing new clean technologies to the market, noting that several years ago the conditions were not yet favourable for electric vehicles, whereas today they have changed. By illustrating how a well-known company developed a model well before demand materialized, he demonstrated how sustainable technologies can gradually evolve into widely adopted commodities. His argument highlighted that short-term challenges do not necessarily reflect the long-term value and potential of sustainable innovations. Importantly, he maintained a factual and empathetic tone throughout, considering both the industry and its customers, which helped depolarize the discussion and keep it solution-oriented.

Besides some positive examples, certain discussions at EFA25 also revealed risks in finding common ground. A common risk when trying to communicate in a depolarizing way is failing to stay on track and being swept up by the intensity of a heated debate. Depolarizing public debates and fostering joint solutions involves maintaining clarity of content while resisting the pull of heated dynamics, avoiding excessive compromise. Discipline means standing by one’s principles, using precise language, and avoiding unproductive confrontations. Therefore, overstating perceived contradictions due to the intensity and depth of the discussion, such as framing climate action and energy security as mutually exclusive or viewing the expansion of renewable energy and the development of grid infrastructure as competing priorities, undermines

meaningful progress. Similarly, focusing only on the short-term costs of ecological investments without considering their long-term benefits can create unnecessary divisions. Overcoming these perceived contradictions is crucial to depolarizing the climate debate and fostering an underlying shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Adding to this risk, [Kirsten Dunlop \(CEO, EIT Climate-KIC\)](#) expressed her concern about how often we get caught up in heated discussions. She emphasized that this occurs not only in the climate debate but also more broadly in the ongoing conversation about the future of the European Union. According to Dunlop, ‘we are in a race against despair’. She observed that the tone of these debates often reflects a struggle to stay hopeful in a fearful environment. Some of the discussions she heard at the EFA25, she noted, amounted to a ‘systematic feeding of fear’ and polarization that is counterproductive to fostering constructive dialogues, raising the question of whether we are truly having the right conversations. Similarly, the lab participants named narrow thinking and polarized societal discourses as additional drivers of delay, contributing to divisive debates and fear-based logics shaping default behaviours. This kind of emotionalization feeds into the risk of failing to stay on track as well. Adding on that, other statements mentioned in the climate track sessions at EFA25, such as ‘The world is changing faster than ever before,’ ‘Europe is the continent most exposed to climate change,’ or ‘We need to change this – it’s the biggest challenge facing humankind’ are valid and help bring clarity to an entangled debate. However, when delivered with a strong sense of urgency, such statements can also be polarizing and risk alienating the very people they aim to engage. A tone of urgency can be effective and add value to constructive discussion, but it should be balanced with other aspects of the KONTEXT Common Ground Check. Especially offering tangible solutions, in this case, can avoid excessive alienation.

3.2 Focus criticism on the argument not the person and avoid generalizations and challenge prejudices

‘Fear alone will not drive climate action.’ With this opening statement, an entire session within the climate track focused on overcoming division and developing new narratives as well as an unifying style of communication in climate action. A central theme of the discussion was the recognition that climate action is not only perceived but also experienced very differently across various groups in society. [Solitaire Townsend \(Co-Founder and Chief Solutionist, Futerra\)](#) emphasized the importance of respectful and appreciative dialogue. She observed that we often dismiss or even discriminate against people whose values differ from our own – particularly when those values seem selfish, protectionist, or status-driven – in ways we would not in other contexts. This form of discrimination can alienate people in a debate and foster polarization. Townsend, thus, highlighted the need for a diversity of messages tailored to different value systems among different societal groups. In her experience, approaching people on an equal level and refraining from personal criticism greatly increases the chances of finding common ground. As a simple example, she described a case in which discussing the co-benefits of a healthy, meat-free diet – such as improved personal well-being – allowed her to reach people who might previously have felt alienated by being judged for eating meat and had not been receptive to discussions about this topic anymore. Once the focus shifted from criticizing individuals to addressing the broader issue – in this case, the negative impacts of an unhealthy diet – the conversation changed, enabling more constructive engagement.

Another illustrative example on a more institutional level came from [Anna Stürigkh \(Member, European Parliament | RENEW Europe | NEOS\)](#) who spoke about the future of the European Union and its strategic direction. She noted that the European Commission currently lacks a clear long-term vision, even though such a vision existed during the last legislative period. Rather than using divisive language, however, she argued that creating such a vision is indeed possible,

presenting the situation in a constructive and forward-looking manner. She also offered insights into why certain laws are adapted or amended over time within EU policy making: often, legislations are passed prior to an election and before it is fully refined, simply to ensure its enactment. Some of these legislations therefore may later require adjustment. While this can be beneficial in certain cases, she acknowledged that a stop-and-go approach to politics can undermine trust and should not be the outcome of this process. Her explanation demonstrates how providing context and alternative perspectives can help depolarize discussions: She shifted the focus from a linear assignment of blame, challenged common prejudices about EU policymaking shortcomings, and deflated exaggerated projections – without diminishing the complexity of the issues involved.

Recognize needs and find common ground

4.1 Recognize needs and lived realities

The third aspect of the KONTEXT Common Ground Check is especially important at the European Forum Alpbach, as most speakers have different lived experiences than the people ultimately affected by their proposals. Finding common solutions requires understanding each other's constraints, needs and possibilities. Some speakers managed to bridge this gap well by recognizing diverse needs, practicing openness and ultimately finding common ground.

The first element is to recognize people's lived realities and connect climate action to their everyday contexts. In a debate on climate communication and public engagement, [Clover Hogan](#) emphasized that 'we are failing to take into account who the people are that we want to reach and where they are starting from.' She pointed to the gap between ambitious policy language and the daily realities of different groups and underlined the need to translate climate action into narratives that feel relevant to those specific contexts. The importance of recognizing people's starting points and perspective was also stressed by [Burkhard von Kienitz](#) (COO, [World Energy Council](#) Officer ; [Trustee, United Europe Board Member](#); [TUM Lecturer](#); [E.ON SE](#)) in the context of public participation and support in the energy transition. Referring to the World Energy Council's idea of 'humanizing energy,' he argued for a stronger focus on energy literacy and on ways that people can connect to energy in their everyday lives. If buy-in is lacking, he suggested, the responsibility lies not with the people but with industry, whose task it is to engage in ways that resonate. He added that when people are intrinsically motivated, beyond mere acceptance, their collective wisdom can be mobilized. Another example of recognizing people's needs was [Lenio Myrivili](#) (Global Chief Heat Officer, [UN-Habitat](#)),

who talked about cities facing rising heat. She drew attention to vulnerable groups for whom adaptation measures have immediate relevance, by decreasing strain from heat, for example. She stressed that, as a rule of thumb, climate solutions can and should be good for nature and good for people at the same time. In these cases, the shift in perspective opened up a new level of dialogue, fostered mutual respect and trust and allowed for more meaningful and constructive exchange.

4.2 Practice openness, listening and appreciating emotions

The second element is to practice openness and give space to emotions. [Immy Kaur](#) (Co-Founder & Director, [CIVIC SQUARE](#)) emphasized that it is crucial to place the transition 'in the hearts of communities'. She explained that if we do not listen to communities and bring them into the centre, our climate ambitions such as the net-zero target will lose support and will probably not hold up. According to Kaur, we need to create a sense of agency within communities by allowing their courage and creativity to shape the transition. Building on Kaur's principle of participation and supporting a sense of agency in citizens, a systemic view on transformation processes needs to include institutional actors and political actors just the same. Sustainable societal change therefore mustn't end at mainstream acceptance or individual adjustments in citizens' everyday lives, but focuses on levers like bold policy measures and structural reforms. This, in turn, presupposes access to decision-makers as humans with needs, emotions and embedded in specific contexts that need to be addressed with sympathy and care. Consequently, practices of listening and the inclusion of emotional dimensions should not be limited to civil society but extended to institutional, economic and

political actors as well – ideally perceiving them beyond their professional role.

Participants in the 10x100 Lab showed how emotional openness can be a powerful way of building common ground. They shared feeling insignificant in the face of the large crisis. Listening to each other and acknowledging their emotions led them to realize a shared organizing challenge, namely, how to build capacity, sustain discipline and align effort with real impact without burning out or diluting energy. In another discussion, Lab participants reflected on the value of spaces for emotions to build trust. Many missed deep listening in institutional contexts and found it powerful for effective discourse and trust building across silos. Moments of ‘naked truths’ and mutual vulnerability during the Lab were experienced as foundations for connection and common ground.

4.3 Identify shared needs or values and find common ground

Finally, after understanding each other’s different standpoints and emotions the third aspect of the KONTEXT Common Ground Check involves also finding commonalities and building the foundation for empowerment and action. The first example is about finding common values and using that as a basis. The 10x100 Lab, for instance, defined their common measure of success by the resilience and vitality of the group and through the quality of their relationships, instead of individual gain or productive output. This added to a cultural shift away from prioritizing self-interest towards strengthening group cohesion, which in turn improved the quality of discussions.

In a hike event that addressed how different generations tackle the climate crisis together [Michaela Krömer \(Attorney at law specialised in climate and human rights litigation, CLAW-Initiative für Klimarecht\)](#) shared difficulties in climate litigation: Even though we do have very strong constitutional rights in Austria, there is no general right to have state compliance with these duties reviewed by a court. She

described this as a ‘deficit in legal protection’ (‘Rechtsschutzdefizit’) – rights exist on paper, yet citizens cannot enforce them or challenge state inaction in court. From her experience, one way to bridge this gap in public debate has been to invoke children’s rights, which have a strong foundation in the Austrian constitution. She noticed that people rarely like to argue against children’s well-being, since it touches on a deeply shared value across generations. While cases have still been dismissed because of this legal deficit, framing them around children’s rights helped shift the discourse, making climate protection harder to dismiss and easier to see as a shared responsibility.

The third example is about finding compromise. In a discussion on green industrial policy [Maria Luís Albuquerque \(Commissioner for Financial Services and the Savings and Investments Union, European Commission\)](#) was challenged on weakening of the EU taxonomy and sustainability reporting. She acknowledged the fears voiced by civil society and NGOs but emphasized that the adjustments reflected compromises with industries struggling under regulatory burdens. This exchange illustrates the fine line between constructive compromise and false balancing (the first risk of the common ground check). While industry interests matter, they should not be weighed on equal terms with the natural ecosystems on which all industries (and society itself) ultimately depend. Presenting ecological limits as just another negotiable interest creates a false symmetry, as if short-term business costs and the long-term survival of ecosystems were of equal value (see chapter 2: Provide clarity). Such framing risks paralysis and low ambition, locking policy into cautious incrementalism instead of the transformative action required.

Offer real solutions and empower action

5.1 Empower action (through perspective change, vision and stories)

The fourth aspect and ultimate aim of the KONTEXT Common Ground Check is to turn shared needs and values into concrete solutions and to empower people to act. Across the forum, different forms of empowerment were actuated – through powerful anecdotes, compelling visions and a clear sense of agency.

One anecdote came from political practice: [Lena Schilling](#) (Member of the European Parliament, Greens/efa in the European Parliament & Grüne Österreich) shared how she was inspired by the collaboration between Kira Marie Peter-Hansen, one of the youngest MEPs, and Villy Søvndal, one of the most experienced MEPs, who put his political weight behind her initiatives. For Schilling, this illustrated how cross-generational support can empower action. She then pledged to follow that example herself, offering backing to younger change makers as a young MEP. In this way, she grounded an abstract debate in a concrete experience of mutual support.

Empowerment also came from sharing best practices. In the session Bold Ideas to Recharge Europe, three founders shared their practical initiatives: Madaster, a digital platform that enables the construction and real estate industry to transition to a circular economy using a novel approach to data management on materials used, Alpine Futures Lab, an initiative who pairs youth and elders to reimagine mountain sustainability via using mixed-reality tools and experiencing potential futures, and MINToring, a program that strengthens digital skills and civic engagement of teenage girls. As three of the twelve finalists of the EFA25 idea competition ‘80 ideas for Europe’, they demonstrated how concrete projects can inspire and enable action.

As another aspect of empowering action, several speakers illustrated the importance of vision to provide direction. Some pointed out the absence of a positive narrative of what Austria will look like once it reaches climate neutrality in 2040 (similar to the missing future vision for the European Union according to Anna Stürgkh in the chapter about depolarizing communication). Others highlighted best practices from Scandinavia in the field of transport and energy policy, presenting them as tangible proof that ambitious measures can work in practice. By showcasing concrete successes such as widespread e-mobility adoption, cycling infrastructure or effective support schemes for renewables, they offered inspiration for adapting and scaling similar approaches in other contexts. [Ivo Degn](#) added a perspective from regenerative farming, describing a European Union where past and present land stewards combine their knowledge to restore soil and biodiversity, where food is understood not as a commodity but as a shared resource, and where governments take on an enabling role to design systems for ‘life in all its forms to flourish.’ Crucially, he stressed that this vision is not utopian: the knowledge and tools to achieve it already exist. Presenting a positive vision and demonstrating feasibility through best practices builds confidence and fosters acceptance of climate action measures. In doing so, the speakers helped shift the discussion from a problem-centred focus towards a more optimistic and action-oriented outlook.

Economic framing also plays a role in empowering action. In many discussions, trade-offs between climate ambition and economic strength were raised, with high costs often cited as arguments against necessary measures. Yet some speakers highlighted that these costs should be seen as investments that yield high returns, and that not all financing must come from the public sector. [Maria Luís Albuquerque](#) emphasized the opportunities of early investments in clean tech, noting that ‘those

who act now will have a competitive advantage going forward.’ She argued that public money should take the lead, but that private investors will follow once the economic value is visible. By emphasizing the opportunities instead of focusing only on the costs the framing can shift the debate from defensive arguments of reducing costs to proactive strategies that drive innovation, create jobs and strengthen long-term competitiveness. This helps move discussions beyond short-term budget concerns towards a vision of shared prosperity, where public and private resources reinforce each other in accelerating the transition.

Finally, inciting a sense of agency was another way speakers at EFA25 brought empowerment into the discussion. [Jon Alexander \(Co-Founder, New Citizen Project\)](#) explained that Western societies have moved through different narratives: from the ‘subject story’ of the 19th century, in which people were largely told what to do, to the ‘consumer story,’ which encouraged individuals to pursue self-interest through consumption. Today, he argued, the consumer story is breaking down, as it cannot address challenges like loneliness, mental health, inequality, or the ecological crisis. With this narrative collapsing, societies face a choice: to fall back into the subject story, as some populist leaders promote, or to move forward into a new story based on participation. Alexander stressed that agency can be fostered by engaging people as active citizens and participants in co-creating solutions, rather than leaving them as passive recipients of policy. In this way, he empowered the audience by reminding them that they are not bystanders but part of the solution.

5.2 Real solutions

Turning shared needs into action also requires moving the debate beyond abstract principles towards clear and workable solutions. When the focus was shifted to concrete solutions, this helped making the discussions at EFA25 more constructive by showing participants where agency lies, what options are available, and how seemingly conflicting interests can be reframed as opportunities. By presenting concrete measures alongside inspiring visions, the conversation shifted from problem diagnosis to a shared

exploration of what can actually be done.

[Clover Hogan](#) reminded the audience that real solutions start not only in technical or financial measures but also in how we deal with emotions. Too often, she argued, climate conversations brush aside despair, as if the only acceptable tone is optimism. Yet despair is a manifestation of powerlessness. If people are not allowed to express it, they risk disengaging altogether. For Hogan, building the capacity to hold despair will in the end allow for the emergence of ‘radical hope’ of the world that is possible. It is therefore an essential step towards meaningful action. She linked this emotional grounding directly to practical measures, highlighting the need for a wealth tax and extended producer responsibility to advance justice; and citizens’ assemblies to ensure that public preferences are incorporated into policy decisions. By connecting values like justice and participation with tangible solutions, her contribution turned the debate into a more constructive exchange where differing views could be discussed more effectively.

[Martin Frick \(Director, WFP Global Office Berlin United Nations World Food Programme\)](#) demonstrated how bringing in solutions does not have to mean pointing at new technologies but can be simply looking back at what we already have. He argued that food security, for example, is less a matter of producing ever more than of distributing and protecting existing resources better. Likewise in water management for climate adaptation, the key often lies less in new large-scale innovation than in rediscovering and adapting traditional practices that have proven resilient to shifting rainfall patterns and other impacts of the climate crisis. By shifting the focus from future innovations to immediate improvements, he redirected the discussion away from distant hopes and promises and towards practical steps that can be taken now.

Finally, [Gernot Wagner](#) brought in concrete economic solutions to move the competitiveness debate onto more tangible ground. He noted that while Europe has often been strong at inventing clean technologies, it has been weaker at implementing them. To address this gap, he suggested long-term public-private partnership

contracts that guarantee cheap electricity for energy-intensive industries – a key requirement for scaling and competing internationally. His contribution shifted the conversation from a high-level, abstract debate to a focused discussion of concrete policies that could support industry in the transition.

At the same time, not all discussions around solutions managed to move from the abstract to the concrete. Some contributions sounded ambitious and forward-looking but remained vague when it came to solutions. Phrases such as ‘fix the broken water cycle’ or ‘distribute food better’ may inspire, yet they do not provide the clarity needed to empower concrete action. When solutions are left too vague, participants may struggle to see how they can contribute, and the debate risks slipping back into abstraction instead of progressing towards implementable steps. Clarity on who has the responsibility to act and what needs to be done next is therefore essential for this final step of the KONTEXT Common Ground Check to be effective.

6. Conclusion

The discussions at the European Forum Alpbach 2025 made clear that the climate transition in Europe is not held back by a lack of knowledge or technology, but by the way we talk about and act on it. The complexities, conflicting interests, economic motives and emotional charge around the climate crisis are ever present and fuel disinformation and polarization. The principles of the KONTEXT Common Ground Check are therefore essential to counter these dynamics and foster constructive discourse. This requires clarity, depolarizing communication, recognition of needs and a focus on real solutions.

At EFA25, participants engaged with multi-layered questions around competitiveness, costs, ecological limits and political realities. Where the principles of common ground were reflected in the debates, conversations became more constructive and solutions-oriented. When speakers broke complex dynamics down and placed them in context, discussions gained a shared foundation and moved forward instead of circling around the status quo.

When speakers communicated without judgment or polarizing language, mutual respect emerged and participants could truly listen to one another. When different needs and perspectives were acknowledged, trust grew and openness to changing views became possible. And when speakers focused on visions and real solutions, debates shifted from a problem-centred to action-oriented direction, concentrating on a successful transition, concrete steps and clear responsibilities.

This paper shows that common ground can be found even in contested areas when debates align with the principles of the KONTEXT Common Ground Check. The challenge now is to carry this spirit beyond Alpbach and apply the KONTEXT Common Ground Check in everyday debates, at events and in publications. By reducing polarization and fostering broader support, a discourse shaped by these principles strengthens momentum for climate action and makes the transition less vulnerable to political shifts or economic pressures, enhancing its resilience.



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