

Unveiling the Impact of EU Climate Adaptation Strategy on Safeguarding the Rights of the Most Vulnerable in the Czech Republic

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December 2024

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This policy brief was produced within the Think Visegrad in Brussels Fellowship programme. In the first half of 2016, eight think-tanks from the Visegrad Group that have been cooperating in the Think Visegrad platform, agreed on the idea proposed by the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, to create a common representation office in Brussels. The main motivation for it is the need to encourage debate on issues of common interest to the EU and the V4 and explain the positions of the V4 to a wide audience. Think Visegrad in Brussels would like to project an image of constructive partners, to explain the dynamics of the debates within our regions and to highlight our active contributions to EU policy-making. For more information about Think Visegrad and its members visit www.think.visegradfund.org.

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) has been implementing an ambitious agenda under the European Green Deal. Sustainable development and climate action have been prioritized as per the ambitious goals covered in the European Green Deal. However, as underscored by Ursula von der Leyen, the focus for the strategic priorities has recently shifted towards economic security, competitiveness, and defence.¹ Yet, the climate crisis constitutes an unprecedented security threat for modern humanity and the development of resilience towards climate change should still serve as a precondition for the fulfilment of those strategic priorities.²

Climate change is no longer a distant issue that is seen related to remote regions in comparison to Europe. The adverse impacts have already started to affect European society, and it is important to adopt a holistic approach to adaptation. Addressing this question requires all actors to cooperate and take immediate measures to adapt to its multifaceted impacts.³

So far, the climate discussion, as well as the policies that the EU has also implemented, have been centred around mitigation. After all, the underlying rationale was that the more we prevent climate change, the less we need to adapt to its effects. In this context, the important question is, as current efforts do not yield effective results in sufficiently mitigating the climate crisis, how should we perceive and develop an adaptation strategy in Europe? How well prepared is the European legal and policy framework for the new challenges climate change poses? More importantly, to what extent are the needs of vulnerable groups, who are and will be disproportionately affected by these risks, being considered? This policy brief aims to assess the current state and future prospects of EU climate adaptation following the European Commission's Communication on Managing Climate Risks – Protecting People dated March 2024, with a focus on how the rights of vulnerable groups in the Czech Republic can be better safeguarded. The discussion is informed by data gathered from 11 anonymous interviews conducted with EU Officials, lobbyists, analysts from think tanks, academics and non-governmental organizations.

Climate Adaptation in the EU and the Protection of Vulnerable Groups

Climate adaptation is not a new agenda item for the EU. There is an established framework of adaptation policies to enhance the resilience of communities against the adverse impacts of climate change. The European Climate Adaptation Strategy fostered by the provisions of the EU Climate Law constitutes the cornerstone of this framework and underlies the need for climate adaptation to become mainstream.⁴ It is no longer feasible for Europe to implement climate action that is mostly centred on mitigation; adaptation must be a consideration for all sectors, with

¹ Reuters. (2024). *Von der Leyen set to name European Commission's new top team*. Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/von-der-leyen-set-name-european-commissions-new-top-team-2024-09-17/>, accessed on 18 September 2024.

² United Nations. (2021). *Climate Change 'Biggest Threat Modern Humans Have Ever Faced', World-Renowned Naturalist Tells Security Council, Calls for Greater Global Cooperation*. United Nations, <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14445.doc.htm>, accessed on 2 September 2024.

³ Anonymous Interview 4, July 2024.

⁴ European Commission. (n.d.). *EU Adaptation Strategy: Adapting to Climate Change*. European Commission, https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/adaptation-climate-change/eu-adaptation-strategy_en, accessed on 10 August 2024.

varying needs and vulnerabilities across regions and locations.⁵ Therefore, timely action is crucial.

Indeed, the European Green Deal sets an ambitious target of climate neutrality by 2050. Yet it does not only aim for climate neutrality but also climate resilience across multiple sectors. This dual focus is essential for achieving a sustainable and resilient Europe. Yet the implementation of the target is a double-edged sword. The transition process accompanies social changes that create great concern, particularly for economies depending on the fossil fuel industry, such as the Czech Republic. Developing strategies to buffer the negative effects of the transition and to build the resilience of vulnerable groups to climate change is one of the most pressing challenges in the ongoing and upcoming climate struggle.⁶

The EU already possesses several mechanisms that could support adaptation. For instance, the Solidarity Fund, operational since 2004, provides a functional framework for emergency measures.⁷ However, the enhancement of adaptive capacity should not be considered limited by the response to natural disasters.⁸ A crucial consideration for climate adaptation is the long-term societal changes and the protection of the rights of individuals who are vulnerable due to income, gender, disability, age, social exclusion and so on.⁹ Indeed, the Just Transition Fund is another financial buffer instrument to address the socio-economic challenges and inequalities caused by the transition to climate neutrality which goes hand in hand with climate adaptation. That said, the accomplishment of the EU's vision for a climate-resilient future by 2030 requires a thorough consideration of climate adaptation and necessitates a human rights-responsive and inclusive approach.

Future of Climate Adaptation Policy Making in the EU

The recently published Climate Action Progress Report for 2023¹⁰, which includes the Report on the Implementation of the EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change, the European Climate Risk Assessment (EUCRA) by the European Environment Agency¹¹, and the Communication on Managing Climate Risks – Protecting People and Prosperity (hereinafter referred as the Communication)¹² by the Commission, are crucial documents that provide an overview of the current state of climate adaptation and outline a roadmap for the future.

⁵ Urban, J., Vačkářová, D., & Badura, T. (2021). *Climate adaptation and climate mitigation do not undermine each other: A cross-cultural test in four countries*. Journal of Environmental Psychology, 77, 101658. Elsevier, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272494421001110>, accessed on 22 September 2024.

⁶ Anonymous interview 2, July 2024.

⁷ Anonymous interview 1, July 2024.

⁸ Brooks, N., & Adger, W. N. (2004). *Assessing and Enhancing Adaptive Capacity*. In B. Lim (Ed.), *Adaptation Policy Frameworks for Climate Change: Developing Strategies, Policies and Measures* (pp. 165-181). UNDP and Cambridge University Press, p. 168.

⁹ Institute for Geography and Geoecology. (2024). *Just Resilience: Integrating Social Justice and Gender into Climate Change Adaptation in Europe*. Institute for Geography and Geoecology, <https://igg-geo.org/en/2024/06/18/just-resilience-integrating-social-justice-and-gender-into-climate-change-adaptation-in-europe/>, accessed on 18 August 2024.

¹⁰ European Commission. (2023). *Progress Report 2023: Shifting Gears – Increasing the Pace of Progress Towards a Green and Prosperous Future*. European Commission, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bruessel/20851.pdf>, accessed on 22 September 2024.

¹¹ European Environment Agency. (2024). *European Climate Risk Assessment: Executive Summary*. European Environment Agency, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bruessel/20851.pdf>, accessed on 22 September 2024.

¹² European Commission. (2024). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Managing Climate Risks – Protecting People and Prosperity (COM/2024/91 final). European Commission, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52024DC0091>, accessed on 10 September 2024.

EUCRA identifies Europe as the “fastest warming continent” which raises concerns about the continent’s preparedness for climate risks. For instance, in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the intensification of risks such as droughts and floods would disproportionately affect already vulnerable groups such as the elderly, low-income populations, people with disabilities, and so on.¹³ Furthermore, additional groups, such as outdoor workers, are inclined to become vulnerable due to the rising temperatures and increasing heat waves.¹⁴ The intersectionality of these groups necessitates even further attention. As adaptation becomes a mainstream consideration in policymaking—like mitigation—it is crucial that States’ positive obligations to safeguard the fundamental rights of these vulnerable individuals are not overlooked in the development of climate-resilient systems¹⁵.

The report calls for targeted actions to address the challenges faced by marginalized communities and emphasizes a “whole-of-society” approach in policymaking¹⁶. Both the EUCRA and the Communication¹⁷ promote an inclusive strategy that prioritizes the well-being and rights of vulnerable populations. To truly adopt a “no one left behind” approach¹⁸, the EU must focus on the concerns of these groups in its climate policies.

In parallel with the recommendations made by the Commission, it will be necessary to revise governance regulations in the future, aiming to improve the availability of information without imposing excessive administrative burdens.¹⁹ Moreover, the development of tools for risk owners, enhanced structures policies with a better reflection on the anticipation of risks, and climate resilience financing constitute important elements for a resilient future.

All these future steps need to be implemented with the consideration of vulnerable individuals, with a whole society approach, and with consideration of the principle of leaving no one behind.²⁰ Moreover, as we can infer from the Communication, such policies need to comply with the “do no significant harm” principle so that cohesion, inclusiveness and equality may be ensured.²¹ It is crucial to recognize that local actions can have broader implications, affecting national and even EU-level resilience. Therefore, better coordination across these levels is essential.²²

It is worth noting that the goal is not to harmonize policies for the sake of uniformity but to ensure that local regulations, such as spatial planning, consider potential disaster scenarios, residual risks, and minimum standards that safeguard recovery and protect affected populations. This calls for a more coherent and integrated approach to adaptation governance. One of the main challenges is to develop governance mechanisms that are both practical and effective.²³

¹³ van Maanen, N., Theokritoff, E., Menke, I., Schleussner, C.F. (2021). *Climate Impacts in the Czech Republic*. Independent Scientific Report, Klimatická žaloba ČR, https://www.klimazaloba.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/FINAL_impact-profile-Czech-Republic.pdf, p. 26 accessed on 12 September 2024.

¹⁴ Anonymous interview 2, July 2024.

¹⁵ Anonymous interview 5, July 2024.

¹⁶ Anonymous interview 1, July 2024.

¹⁷ European Commission. (2024). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Managing Climate Risks – Protecting People and Prosperity (COM/2024/91 final). European Commission, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52024DC0091>, accessed on 10 September 2024.

¹⁸ European Commission. (2019). *The European Green Deal (COM/2019/640 final)*. European Commission, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1576150542719&uri=COM%3A2019%3A640%3AFIN>, accessed on 22 September 2024.

¹⁹ Anonymous interview 1, July 2024.

²⁰ Anonymous interview 10, July 2024.

²¹ Anonymous interview 3, July 2024.

²² Anonymous interview 1, July 2024.

²³ Anonymous interview 1, July 2024.

This includes establishing indicators and monitoring systems to assess the impacts of adaptation measures and making a strong case for necessary investments. It is also important to identify and avoid maladaptation, which can exacerbate vulnerabilities. Ideally, robust impact measurement systems should be in place before further investments are made, but the urgency of the climate crisis does not seem to be allowing for this sequence. This presents a significant future challenge for policymakers in member states.²⁴

On the other hand, the EU has entered a new legislative term with somewhat different political dynamics. This new political environment may not see an aggressive push for new climate adaptation legislation.²⁵ Yet, with a focus on implementing and applying existing frameworks, member states are expected to ensure climate risk management where adaptation benefits shall be shared in an equitable manner. While there is consensus among member states and across the political spectrum that more needs to be done to build resilience and reduce vulnerabilities, the progress varies. Some states have effectively mainstreamed adaptation into their sectoral strategies with consideration of vulnerable communities. Others still lag behind.²⁶

Reflection on the Climate Adaptation and Safeguarding Rights of Vulnerable Population in the Czech Republic

Since 2005, the starting year for the targets set in the current Czech Climate Protection Policy, total GHG emissions (excluding the LULUCF sector and including indirect emissions) have decreased by 20.7% as of 2021.²⁷ Yet the projections show that its emissions per capita are above the EU average. Further mitigation efforts are needed in the country. Similarly, adaptation efforts, while progressing, still require significant enhancement.²⁸

The latest updated National Adaptation Strategy (NAS) and National Action Plan (NAP) of the Czech Republic are dated 2021, the NAP being valid for the period between 2021-2025. Reducing the vulnerability towards climate change and making human society climate resilient is one of the specified strategic objectives. Accordingly, adaptation policies are being integrated into broader national strategies, but as the EUCRA highlights, the pace of these efforts is a critical factor, putting pressure on the Czech Republic to align with the EU's climate objectives.

Compared to Western member states, the Czech Republic, along with other CEE countries, has historically lagged in environmental policy adoption.²⁹ The heavy reliance on fossil fuel-based industries in these regions complicates the transition process and poses challenges for effective adaptation.³⁰

The Czech Republic faces a range of climate adaptation challenges, including increased flood risks, water security issues, heat waves, and impacts on agriculture and public health. Analysing demographic factors is essential for understanding the country's adaptive capacity and for

²⁴ Anonymous interview 1, July 2024.

²⁵ Anonymous interviews 1, 2, 3 and 10, July 2024.

²⁶ Anonymous interview 1, July 2024.

²⁷ Czech Environmental Information Agency (CENIA). (2023). *Report on the Environment of the Czech Republic 2022*. Ministry of the Environment of the Czech Republic. Available at <https://www.cenia.cz/publikace/zpravy-o-zp/>, accessed on 15 December 2024.

²⁸ Anonymous interview 7, July 2024.

²⁹ Křištofová, K., Lehnert, M., Martinát, S., Tokar, V., & Opravil, Z. (2022). *Adaptation to climate change in the eastern regions of the Czech Republic: An analysis of the measures proposed by local governments*. Land Use Policy, 114, 105949. Elsevier, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2021.105949>, accessed on 22 September 2024.; Anonymous interview 9, July 2024.

³⁰ Anonymous interviews 6 and 9, July 2024.

planning future steps towards climate resilience in the face of these climate risks. Moreover, the EU is grappling with a demographic challenge characterized by an ageing population and a shrinking workforce. One-fifth of the population of the Czech Republic consists of elderly individuals.³¹ In this context, the human rights dimension becomes increasingly relevant, as an ageing population requires more robust adaptation measures. Regions with a high proportion of elderly residents exhibit limited adaptive capacity, making them particularly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change. These areas necessitate a holistic approach that allocates sufficient resources to address various scenarios.

Moreover, the intersectionality of vulnerabilities must be a key consideration in ensuring the Czech Republic's adaptive capacity.³² The elderly constitute a significant vulnerable population, and it is well-documented that women, especially elderly women living alone with limited access to resources such as energy, are disproportionately affected by certain climate impacts like hot spells.³³ This group represents one of the most vulnerable in Czechia, with a very limited capacity to adapt.

Social justice is also a critical issue in the Czech Republic, given that marginalized groups often have less influence over decision-making processes and are thus disproportionately affected by climate change. Ensuring that the needs of these groups are addressed in climate adaptation legal and policy frameworks is essential for achieving a just and resilient society.

Czech society overall shares the concern for the adverse consequences of climate change, yet according to a recent study, 47% of the population believes that certain projections for the impacts of climate change are exaggerated concerning the impact of climate change, and more than 70% believe that there are more important problems in the country than climate change, such as inflation and public health.³⁴ Nevertheless, society is scared of the adverse risks of climate change, particularly water scarcity and extreme events to be caused by climate change. It is also important to note that vulnerable groups, especially those with lower incomes, are challenged disproportionately in integrating climate-friendly behaviours as they lack the required financial resources and supportive infrastructure. Even though an overall awareness is present in society, the scepticism towards the impacts and urgency of climate action and perceived priorities can hinder effective responses to climate impacts. As the climate crisis continues to unfold, it is crucial to recognize and address these issues and foster a risk culture in the community to ensure that all communities, especially those most at risk, are adequately protected and supported in their adaptation efforts.³⁵

³¹ Eurydice. (n.d.). *Population: Demographic Situation, Languages and Religions in Czechia*. European Commission, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/czechia/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions>, accessed on 22 September 2024.

³² Bari, A. B. M. M., Intesar, A., Mamun, A. A., Debnath, B., Islam, A. R. M. T., Alam, G. M. M., & Parvez, M. S. (2024). *Gender-based vulnerability and adaptive capacity in the disaster-prone coastal areas from an intersectionality perspective*. *Climate Risk Management*, 43, 100581. Elsevier, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crm.2023.100581>, accessed on 22 September 2024.

³³ European Greens. (n.d.). *Women's Rights, Gender, and Climate Change in Europe*. European Greens, <https://europeangreens.eu/resolutions/womensrights-gender-and-climate-change-europe/>, accessed on 22 September 2024; European Parliament. (2017). *Climate Change: Mitigating the Impact on Women*. European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20171201STO89304/climate-change-mitigating-the-impact-on-women>, accessed on 22 September 2024.

³⁴ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. (2023). *Country Report: Czechia – Social-Ecological Transformation*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bruessel/20851.pdf>, accessed on 22 September 2024.

³⁵ Anonymous interview 4, July 2024.

Challenges and Recommendations

A critical challenge for effective climate adaptation for the member states, especially for CEE countries, is the lack of a strong political mandate. To prioritize adaptation, public actors must take a leading role, demonstrating political commitment and ensuring that adaptation becomes a national priority.³⁶ This would influence societal perceptions, enhance cooperation and bring relevant stakeholders together.

Although there is currently no dedicated adaptation fund, there are resources that can be leveraged for this purpose. The Social Climate Fund, designed to buffer the financial impact of the green transition on vulnerable households and enterprises, requires Member States to submit detailed plans by mid-2025. These social climate outlining strategies for the allocation of funds should also comply with the whole-of-society approach reflected in the Communication and be considerate of climate adaptation needs. However, the Social Climate Fund may not suffice for preparedness with its limited size and may not meet the vulnerable population's needs.³⁷ Other funding sources, such as the Cohesion Funds and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), also hold potential for adaptation.³⁸ Member States indeed have significant discretion in allocating these funds, which could be used to support various adaptation measures.

Moreover, investments in adaptation measures complying with the principle of doing no significant harm are critically important to render vulnerable groups resilient.³⁹ A rigorous application of the “do no significant harm” (DNSH) principle is required. This means that any investment, whether in schools, roads, public buildings, or other areas, should account for climate risks and how the local population might be affected.⁴⁰ It is important to note that the DNSH principle, now embedded in the financial regulation for the upcoming multiannual financial framework, requires all new projects to be climate-proofed, not only for mitigation but also for adaptation. Comprehensive data on adaptation spending is crucial as estimates show that 98% of adaptation funding comes from public sources.⁴¹ As these figures are incomplete and do not fully capture the scope of investment needs, improving the accuracy of adaptation investment estimates is essential for informed decision-making.⁴²

Bridging the gap between policy and implementation is crucial to ensure that no one is left behind. This is possible through improving the governance mechanisms concerning climate adaptation. Ongoing evaluation and additional measures will be necessary to address emerging issues and enhance the ongoing framework's effectiveness. In this framework, adaptation requires a cohesive approach that is both local and broader in scope, recognizing the unique challenges faced in different areas. For example, urban areas may face heat islands and air quality issues, while rural areas may grapple with floods and landslides. Identifying vulnerable groups in these contexts is important, given that in each context, vulnerable individuals are impacted in different ways.⁴³

³⁶ Anonymous interview 7, July 2024.

³⁷ Anonymous interview 10, July 2024.

³⁸ Anonymous interview 1, July 2024.

³⁹ Anonymous interview 3, July 2024.

⁴⁰ Anonymous interviews 1 and 3, July 2024.

⁴¹ Climate Policy Initiative. (2023). *Global Landscape of Climate Finance 2023*. Climate Policy Initiative, <https://www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/publication/global-landscape-of-climate-finance-2023/>, accessed on 22 September 2024.

⁴² Anonymous interview 3, July 2024.

⁴³ Anonymous interview 4, July 2024.

Last but not least, a culture of risk awareness and ecological literacy must be ensured.⁴⁴ The urgency of the crisis necessitates a deeper understanding of climate risks and a shift public perception and policy focus. Instead of opting for allocating more resources to familiar solutions, consideration should be given to other measures that might be more effective and beneficial for vulnerable populations. For instance, nature-based approaches could also provide health benefits and enhance access to green spaces, which is particularly important for communities living in urbanized heat islands. Finally, the skills and knowledge gap in this context must be addressed to effectively implement adaptation measures.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Anonymous interviews 1 and 4, July 2024.

⁴⁵ Anonymous interview 1, July 2024.

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