



Claudia Detsch

# Climate Crunch Questions

How social barriers can be overcome and sceptical milieus brought on board in the social-ecological transformation

– Comparative Country Report –

**EUROPA**

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# INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

There is no lack of interest, nor is there any lack of awareness. Climate is important; climate change is scary. But that alone is no guarantee for a good, widely accepted climate policy. *How* should the climate-neutral transition be shaped in concrete terms? *That* is the crucial question. What topics are meeting with resistance? Which concerns are shared in different milieus, which are running into opposition? Anyone who wants to understand climate-related conflicts needs to understand the drivers. Anyone who wants to back reforms that have a chance of gaining broad support needs to understand the underlying factors. Generally speaking, the choice of the means is decisive when it comes to forming possible alliances and obtaining social support. In other words: if the wrong tools are chosen, no majorities can be forged – and things are bound to get bumpy in the field of climate policy.

So, what can politicians and public actors do to successfully shape the climate transition and gain the approval of the population? Our study provides answers to this question.

The Competence Centre for Climate and Social Justice of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung commissioned the SINUS-Institute to conduct a population survey in 19 European and North American countries: Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom, USA. The study design was based on quantitative surveys of a representative population with a sample size of at least 1,200 people between the ages of 18 and 69 per country per country (22,823 cases in total). What perceptions, interests, and fears do people associate with the social-ecological transformation? Where is there broad support, where are barriers lurking? This is what we determined to look into more closely.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of the survey was not just to map a wide array of climate policy attitudes along traditional socio-demographic criteria. Rather, the intent was also to analyse to what extent and under what conditions different social milieus are receptive to climate policy measures. To this end, the Sinus-Meta-Milieus target group model was integrated into the survey design. Hence 29 additional statements representing typical values mirroring different realities of life for respondents were surveyed.

Sinus-Milieus are to be understood as social groups that are similar in terms of their social-economic circumstances as well as their cultural values, everyday attitudes, ways of life and life goals. The milieu concept combines vertical (in-

come, education, occupation) and horizontal (values, everyday attitudes, way of life, life goals) differences that come to light in discussions about climate economics, therefore particularly lending themselves to a simultaneous analysis of distributional and value conflicts.<sup>2</sup> This analytical approach takes into account the values, life views and the way of life of different social milieus as well as their social status. On this basis it is possible to achieve a more comprehensive and differentiated view of the social challenges associated with a social-ecological transformation. The Sinus-Milieus can be represented in a coordinate system (Figure 1), whereby the milieus are categorised vertically along the “social status” dimension and horizontally along the “basic values” dimension:

This analysis is based on the following areas covered by the survey:

- Awareness of the importance and relevance of climate as a problematic topic
- Attitudes, motivators and barriers characterising climate and environmentally conscious behaviour
- Assessment of, and attitudes towards changing our way of life and doing business, including approval of, or opposition to, policies
- Interest in information and levels of knowledge about climate and policies

The Sinus-Meta-Milieus function as “groups of like-minded people” across national borders. They are structured as internationally comparable population groups with similar basic orientations and lifestyles (each adapted to national circumstances). This is helpful in the following analysis, as it allows common statements to be made for the meta-milieus and conclusions to be drawn about all the countries surveyed. An approach based purely on socio-demographic criteria would only allow this to a limited extent.

<sup>1</sup> All results of the survey at: <https://justclimate.fes.de/survey-attitudes-social-ecological-transformation>

<sup>2</sup> Reusswig, F. / Schleer, C. (2021): Auswirkungen von Klimaschutzmaßnahmen auf Akteursgruppen im Hinblick auf Veto- und Aneignungspositionen. Literaturstudie zur gesellschaftlichen Resonanzfähigkeit von Klimapolitik im Auftrag der Wissenschaftsplattform Klimaschutz [Effects of climate protection measures on stakeholder groups with regard to veto and appropriation positions. Literature study on the social resonance of climate policy on behalf of the Climate Protection Science Platform]. Berlin, Potsdam.

Figure 1

**Coordinate system of the Sinus-Meta-Milieus along the dimensions of social status and basic values**

(reorientation meaning an openness to changes in consumption and economic patterns, 18- to 69-year-olds)

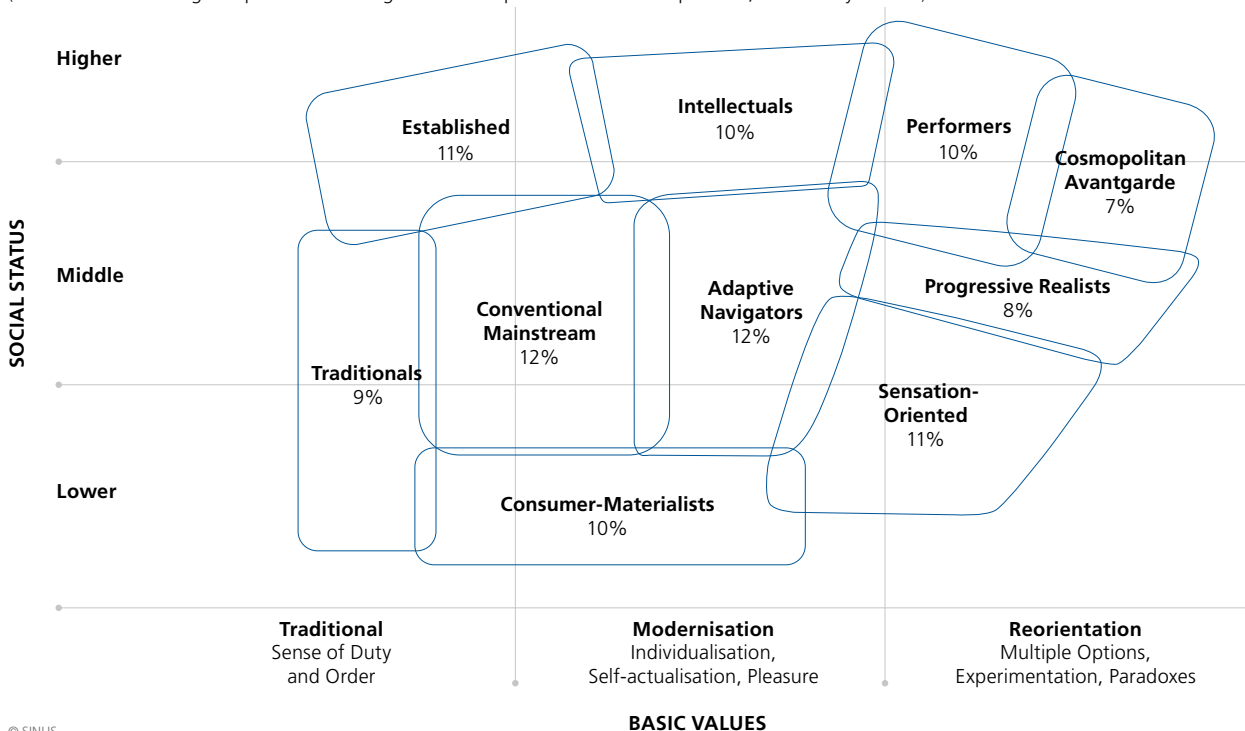


Figure 2

**Brief description of the "Sinus-Meta-Milieus in Established Markets"**

|                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Established</b>             | <b>Status-driven conservative elite:</b> High self-confidence, traditional responsibility and performance ethics, exclusivity and status claims, acceptance of social order                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Intellectuals</b>           | <b>Academic elite with post-material beliefs:</b> High affinity for enjoyment, sensuality, art and culture, critical of globalisation, advocate for justice and public welfare, taking responsibility for oneself and others, affinity for education and high quality of life                                         |
| <b>Performers</b>              | <b>Efficiency- and progress-oriented modern elite:</b> Global economic and liberal thinking, affinity for higher consumption, modern design, early adopting, interest in technology and digital, competitive and careeroriented, networker, open to change                                                            |
| <b>Cosmopolitan Avantgarde</b> | <b>Ambitious and individualistic avant-garde:</b> Cosmopolitan, urban, mobile and flexible, digital nomads, way of living vanguards, pronounced self-expression, postmodern way of living elite, antimainstream, desire to stand out, joie de vivre, ambitious and successoriented                                    |
| <b>Progressive Realists</b>    | <b>Drivers of social transformation:</b> Sustainable way of living but without renunciation, driving the global social transformation, progressive, optimistic, ease of dealing with contradictions, party and protest, seriousness and entertainm                                                                    |
| <b>Adaptive Navigators</b>     | <b>Adapted, modern mainstream:</b> Flexible pragmatists, young modern middle class, high willingness to adapt and perform, modern way of living, digital affinity, reliable and loyal, open to new – but tested and verified – things                                                                                 |
| <b>Sensation-Oriented</b>      | <b>Materialistic and entertainment-orientated (lower) middle class:</b> Hedonistic, with focus on today, conspicuous consumption, unconcerned, open to risks, anti-bourgeois yet materialistic way of living, rejection of political correctness and conventions, looking for fun, action, entertainment, stimulation |
| <b>Conventional Mainstream</b> | <b>Harmony-seeking older middle-class:</b> Desire for secure circumstances, fear of losing achievements, search for community, cohesion, social life, neighbourly support, distrust towards elites, feeling of being left out in favour of other groups, down to earth                                                |
| <b>Traditionals</b>            | <b>Order-seeking older generation:</b> Petty bourgeois world, traditional working-class culture, desire for social security, harmony, consistency, voluntarily disconnection from modern way of living and digital culture, desire for simple, safe, down to earth                                                    |
| <b>Consumer-Materialists</b>   | <b>Lower class striving for validation:</b> Precarious living conditions, undemanding adaptation to necessities, desire for consumption standard of the middle class, defiant cohesion within their own community, fear of speed of change and being left behind                                                      |

## COUNTRY COMPARISON

### WHO IS AFRAID OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND WHEN?

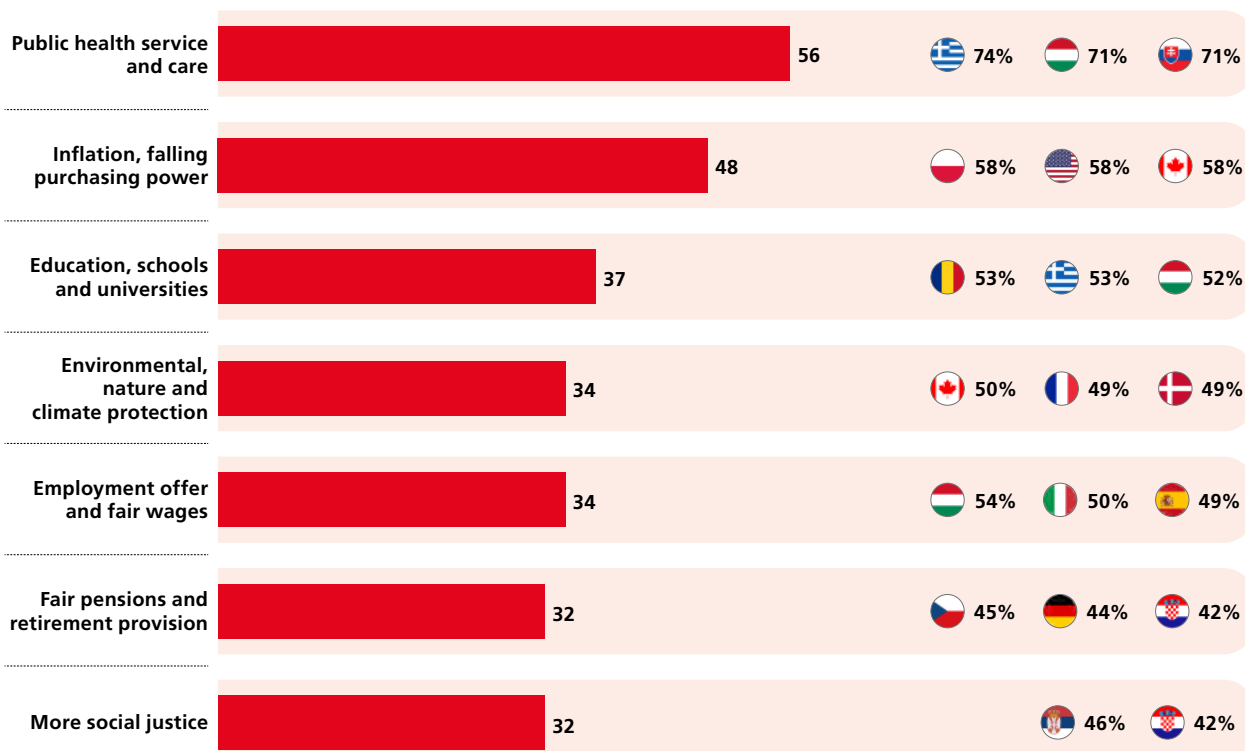
Our survey begins with the identification of problem awareness. The first key question in the survey concerns **the most important issues that politicians should address**. “Environmental, nature and climate protection” came in fourth place on average across all countries, cited by 34% of respondents (up to five responses were possible from a total of 15 suggested topics). The list is headed by “public health service and care” (56%), “inflation and declining purchasing power” (48%), “education, schools and universities” (37%). “Employment offers and fair wages” (34%) follow in fifth place.

In a country comparison, the values for the topic of “environmental, nature and climate protection” are significantly lower in south-east Europe than in western Europe and North America. The Iberian Peninsula, the UK, Sweden and, to a lesser extent, Poland have values close to the overall average. If we look beyond national borders and compare the attitudes between the milieus,<sup>3</sup> the milieus of lower and middle social status attach significantly less importance to the topic (*Conventional Mainstream, Adaptive Navigators, Sensation Oriented, Consumer Materialists*)

<sup>3</sup> Summarising the individual milieus of several countries is made possible by the Sinus-Meta-Milieu methodology, see above.

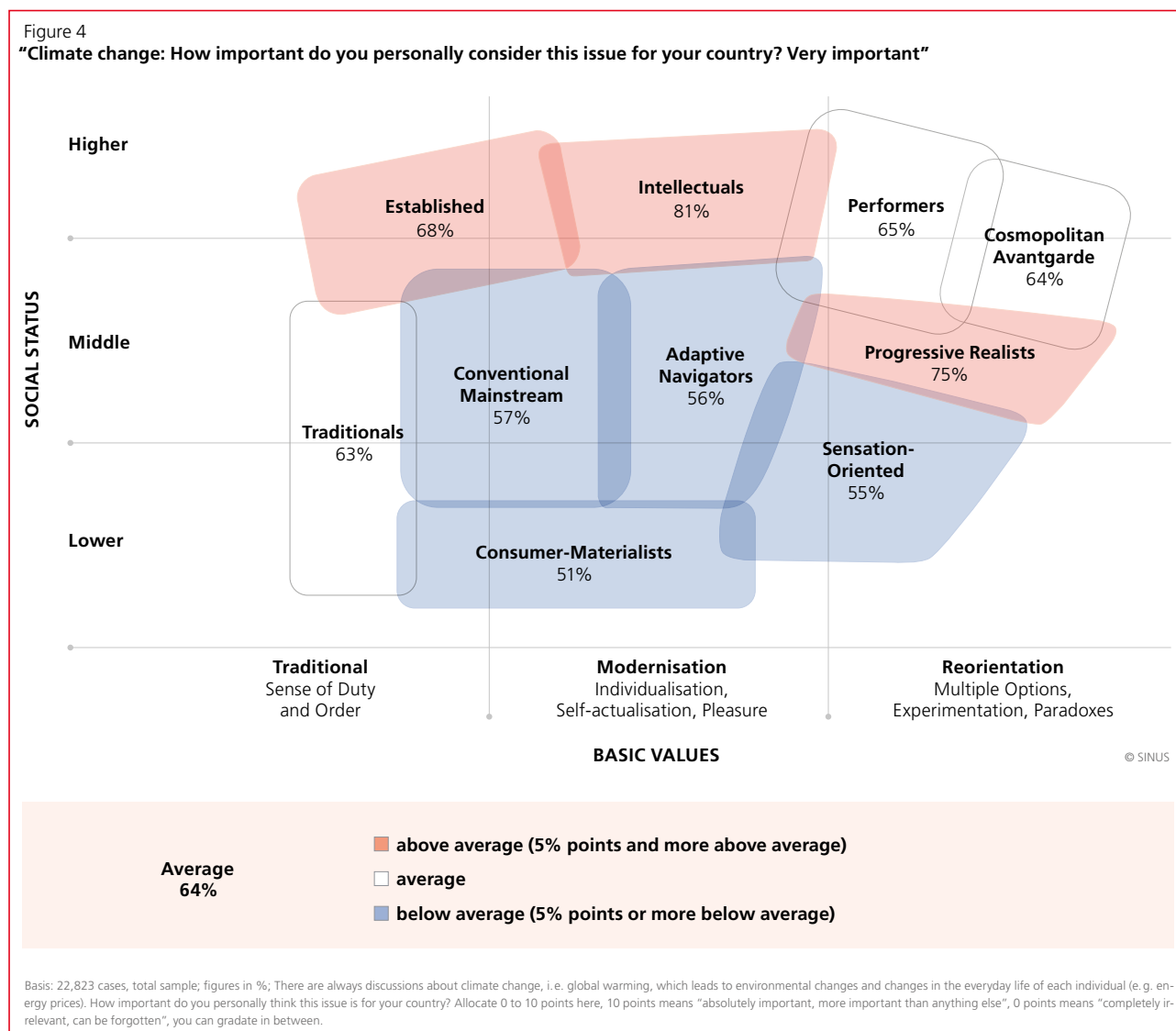
Figure 3

The most important topics that politicians should take care of (naming up to five topics out of 15)



mentioned with above-average frequency in these countries

Basis: 22,823 cases, total sample; figures in %; In your opinion, which of the following topics are the most important that politicians should address? Please select up to 5 topics. (Presentation of the most frequent responses)

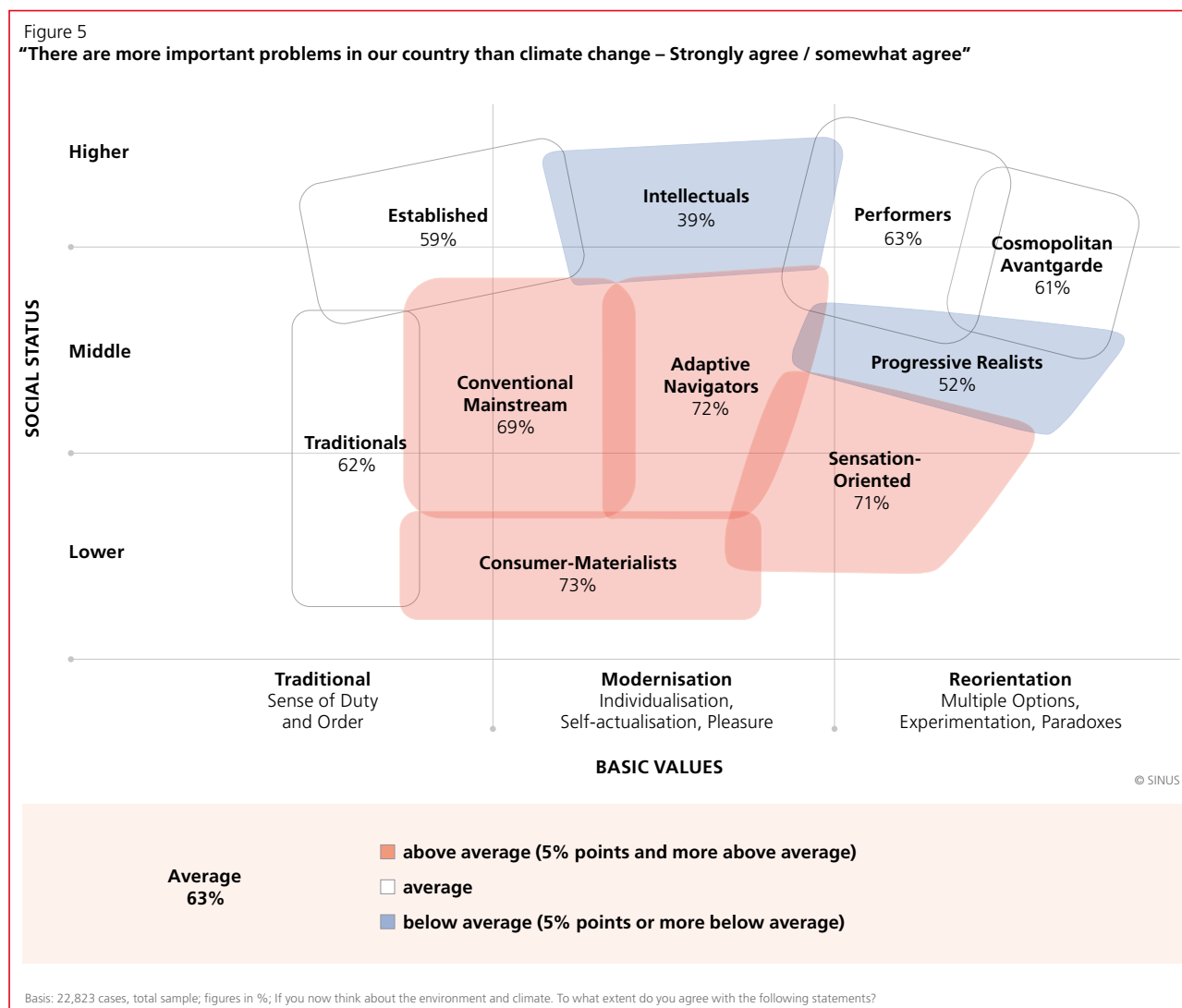


than the milieus of the upper social status group (*Intellectuals*, *Cosmopolitan Avantgarde*, *Established*, *Performers*). The topic of "Secure energy supply and affordable energy prices" was selected by 28% of all respondents as one of the five most pressing issues that politicians should address, putting it in tenth place (out of 15) in the overall international ranking. However, the topic was ranked significantly higher in Germany (46%), Poland (44%), the UK (42%), the Czech Republic (42%) and Slovakia (37%). It is probably no coincidence that these countries, which are traditionally dependent on Russian energy resources, see a greater need for action here.

When asked about the greatest challenges threatening the preservation of our foundations of life, "climate change and climate-damaging emissions" came in second place at 52%, surpassed only by "water pollution and water quality" (again, up to 5 responses were possible here from a total of 11 topics). However, these responses in connection with climate change are significantly lower for the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Serbia and Croatia. Among the milieus, *Intellectuals* rate climate change much higher (73%), while the other milieus do not display any major deviations from the average value of 52%.

The topic of "increasing consumption of energy and raw materials" was stated by 34% to be the biggest challenge for preserving our planet (ranked 7<sup>th</sup> among the 11 possible topics), led by Poland (48%), Hungary (47%), Germany (41%) and Turkey (41%). **Around two-thirds of respondents agree with the statement that renewable energy (solar, wind, etc.) has become more important to them since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.** This figure is highest in Turkey (90%), Denmark (83%) and Portugal (80%), and lowest in the USA (52%), the Czech Republic (53%) and Slovakia (54%). However, the upper social status milieus are above average in their approval (across all value orientations), while the three milieus at the bottom left of the milieu coordinate system (low social status and traditional values) are below average in this regard. The energy transition is also justified by political decision-makers and other supporters in terms of the gain in national sovereignty, greater reliability of supply and more stable prices for households. This narrative does not yet appear to effectively align with the lifeworld of the aforementioned milieus.

When it comes to the **relevance of climate change as a topic for their own country**, differences in milieu are also



significant. With an average of 64% considering the topic to be very important, *Consumer Materialists*, *Sensation-Oriented*, *Adaptive Navigators* and *Conventional Mainstream* are significantly below the average, while *Intellectuals* and *Progressive Realists* rate significantly higher. A country comparison shows that the south-east European countries and Italy lie above the average.

Around 80% of respondents are **afraid of climate** change; extreme weather events in particular worry almost two-thirds. After the Czech Republic (19%), Germany has the lowest number of respondents who fully affirm the statement that they are afraid of the consequences of climate change (25%).

However, almost two-thirds (63%) also agree with the statement that **there are problems more important than climate change** (the list of the most pressing problems cited above provides respective response levels, see also figure 3). **Thus, temperature rise is competing for importance. At the latest when it appears that climate policies are exacerbating problems that are perceived as more important, conflicts are very likely to arise. In the *Adaptive Navigators* milieu, 72% of respondents agree that there are more important problems. According to**

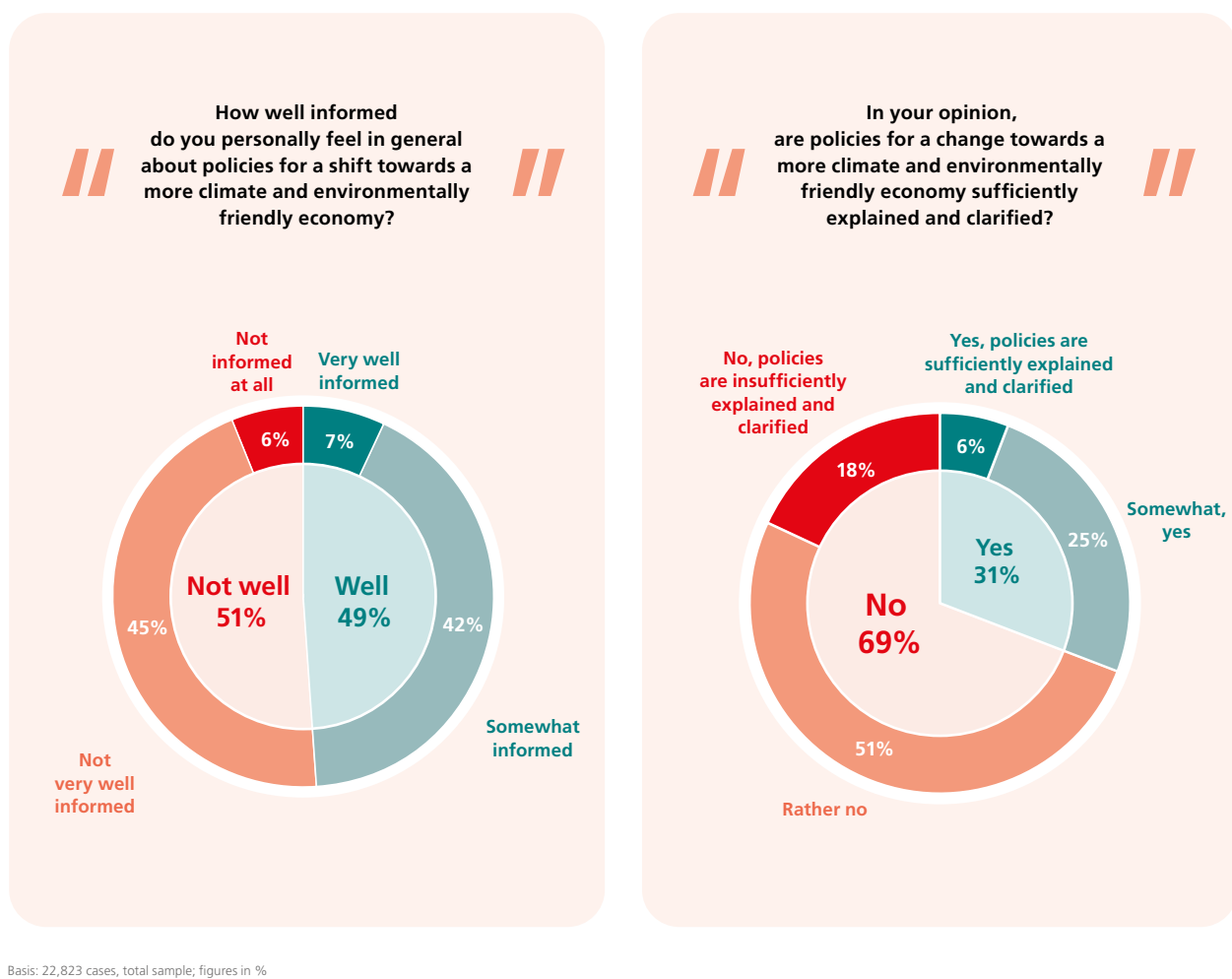
**the SINUS-Institute, this milieu of the young modern middle class is of central importance.** It is open-minded, determined, well-educated, flexible, willing to adapt and generally open to new ideas – and therefore actually receptive to the goal of a sustainable society. If we succeed in convincing the modern middle class of concrete measures, this will also have an impact on neighbouring milieus (see appendix on the milieu groups and their specific barriers and resonance potentials).<sup>4</sup>

## NO ILLUSIONS, NO FAITH IN TECHNOLOGY

Germany has the lowest score for the statement that **“we should all be willing to change our way of life for the sake of the environment”** – only 78% agree here, while the average for the 19 countries is 88%. Here too, the differences between milieus are considerable, although they are much further apart in terms of those who “fully agree” (66% of *Intellectuals* compared to 28% of *Adaptive Navi-*

<sup>4</sup> Schleer, C. / Wisniewski, N. / Reusswig, F. (2024): Shaping the socio-ecological transformation: How social barriers can be overcome and how resonance potentials can be utilised. SINUS-Institut. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bruessel/21136.pdf>

Figure 6  
General level of information and need for explanation of political measures



gators) than for broader concurrence. **However, the very high rates of approval overall leave no doubt that there is a fundamental willingness to react to rising temperatures by changing one's own behaviour.**

Respondents have no illusions regarding the scope of the challenge. Only just over one-third of respondents agree that science and technology will solve the problem of climate change without us having to fundamentally change our way of life. Turkey is far ahead in this respect (71%), but Poland is also above average at 46%. Only 9% across all countries fully agree with this statement. Turkey (25%) and the USA (14%) have the highest scores here. The milieus are far apart in this regard, and in a rather atypical way. The otherwise often rather divergent poles formed by *Intellectuals* (17%) and *Consumer Materialists* (30%) have significantly below-average values, followed by *Traditionalists* and *Conventional Mainstream*. The milieus can obviously be sorted more strongly according to overlapping value orientations in this regard. With the exception of the *Progressive Realists*, the milieus with a value orientation in the coordinate system towards modernisation and reorientation show above-average trust. Here, fundamental values are obviously much more important than social status.

## PREACHING TO THE CONVERTED? LACK OF INFORMATION, EXPLANATIONS AND A MILIEU-SPECIFIC APPROACH

**Four out of five people say they are interested in the topic of climate change.** However, there are significant milieu differences here – people of higher social status are clearly more interested in the topic. If, for example, the *Consumer Materialists* (39%) have less or no interest in the topic, then they are more likely to perceive measures to combat climate change as an imposition, as they do not perceive or recognise climate change as a central problem.

In this context, the percentage figures on the question of **how well informed people generally feel about political measures** do stand out. 49% of respondents personally feel well or somewhat informed about policies involving a shift towards a more climate and environmentally friendly economy. The values are highest for Turkey (71%), Portugal and the USA (60%), and lowest for Serbia (35%) and Denmark (39%). The distribution of milieus is interesting here. **The milieus in favour of reorientation, i.e. a restructuring of businesses and society, feel more informed than average, while more traditional milieus with low to medium social status feel less informed than average.**

Obviously, surveyed persons who are already interested in the topic are better informed than the sceptics. **In order to implement a climate policy reform agenda, however, it will also be necessary to more effectively address those who are not convinced.** This cannot be done primarily by citing statistics and studies or tracing out future scenarios, as these seem to be interesting primarily for those who are already interested. **If one wants to get the more sceptical or uninterested groups on board, other approaches are needed.**

This is even clearer when it comes to the question of **whether policies promoting change towards a more climate and environmentally friendly economy are sufficiently explained and clarified** from the respondents' point of view. 69% state that this is not the case, while 31% are in agreement with the statement. The highest levels of agreement are to be found in Turkey (47%) and North America (45% each), with the lowest scores being for Serbia (16%), Croatia (18%) and the Czech Republic (20%). Here as well, the values are highest in the milieus that are open to a reorientation of the economy and society (right-hand side of the coordinate system). The lowest values are found in the three milieus at the bottom left of the coordinate system. **The results of this representative survey indicate a clear task for politicians to communicate climate policies more comprehensively, explain their practical consequences and then implement them with a reliable planning horizon and in comprehensible steps.**

## FROM CHANGE TO DETERIORATION? THE FOCUS MUST BE ON THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

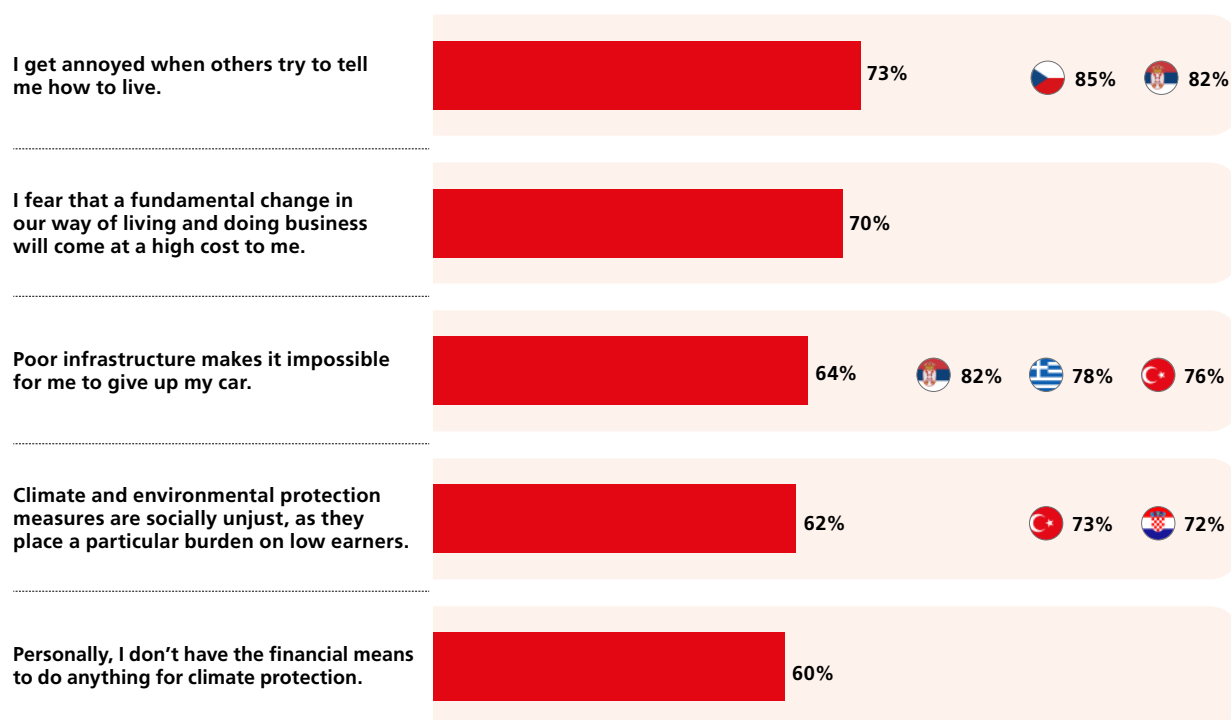
Over one fifth of respondents agree that **the idea of a fundamental change in our way of life and doing business worries them**, as they know from experience that many people will be worse off afterwards than they were before. Interestingly, these values are lower in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe, even so the former had an intensive experience of transformation since the fall of the Iron Curtain. The exception in the region is Romania, where 30% agree with this statement, followed by the USA. The lowest values are found in Serbia, Denmark and Sweden. The differences between milieus are considerable regarding this question. Since the *Intellectuals* and the *Cosmopolitan Avantgarde* are less likely to have negative experiences with transformations than industrial workers, this is not surprising. Overall, almost one in two respondents at least tends to agree with this statement.

## 70% fear that a fundamental change in our way of life and doing business will come at a high cost to them.

This concern regarding the extent and effects of a fundamental transformation is probably correlated with the following attitude: "instead of focusing on climate protection, we should concentrate on adapting to the consequences of climate change". More than half agree with this statement. This figure is highest in France (65%) and Greece (62%), the

Figure 7

### The biggest barriers to climate and environmentally conscious behaviour



mentioned with above-average frequency in these countries

USA and Croatia (both 59%), and lowest in Poland, the Czech Republic (both 46%), Portugal (47%) and Germany (48%). The differences between milieus are significant – less than one-third of the *Intellectuals* (30%) agree, compared to almost two-thirds of the *Adaptive Navigators* (62%) and the *Sensation Oriented* (64%). Here, too, these milieus need to be persuaded why the fight against a further rise in temperatures remains important, what the consequences would otherwise be for their own everyday lives and what the consequences of climate change would be.

**There are major concerns about the impact on the social balance.** “Measures to protect the climate and the environment are socially unjust, as they burden low-income earners in particular” – more **than one-fifth completely agree and a further 40% somewhat agree**. The leader is Germany, where almost a third of respondents fully agree (29%, surpassed only by Turkey with 30%; overall, 73% agree in Turkey and 66% in Germany). This concern is lowest in Italy and the UK (16% fully agree) and in North America (17%). Unsurprisingly, milieus with a lower social status agree significantly more often.

However, it cannot be said that the more affluent milieus are simply trying to get away with it; taking their approval for a fair distribution of costs seriously, they would have to shoulder quite a share of those costs. Overall, almost 90% of all respondents say they would be prepared to do more if the costs were distributed fairly. This figure is even lower in the milieus with a lower social status.

**So, it is not just a question of social justice – but the responses clearly show it as a *sine qua non*.** This individual commitment on the part of the financially better-off will indeed have to be called for – the milieus of lower social status realise that their own individual responsibility is smaller. Accordingly, they will closely monitor whether financially stronger groups and the educated elite are actually doing their fair share (see also appendix, on the insecure and critically reserved milieus).

**Another 90% agree with the statement that politicians must work harder to ensure the structuring of our economic system and way of life is socially just.** This does not come cheaply: 87% of respondents agree with providing more financial support for people on low incomes if the costs of electricity, heating or mobility rise due to climate protection measures (46% fully agree, a further 41% somewhat agree). These figures are highest in south-east Europe. 90% agree with government support for the renovation of buildings for thermal insulation, 91% agree with financial support for cost-efficient heating and heating systems (e.g. heat pumps).

## STATE FUNDING EXPECTED – SPECIFIC MEASURES IN THE MOOD TEST

With regard to the approval ratings for various measures to promote climate and environmental protection, it can be noted quite simply that these are high-

**est where there is state funding or where respondents themselves do not have to fear any additional direct costs** – for example, when it comes to expanding local public transport (92% agree with reducing public transport fares). 90% agree with expanding the **transport network** and the frequency of **local public transport**. More **charging stations for electric or hybrid vehicles** are welcomed by 82%, while 76% agree with **promoting electric vehicles** (e.g. through tax relief and financial subsidies). There are significant differences between milieus when it comes to the promotion of electric vehicles and charging points; the milieus with higher social status and *Progressive Realists* (49%) agree more than average, while *Adaptive Navigators* (28% in full agreement), *Conventional Mainstream* (31%) and *Consumer Materialists* (31%) agree less than average.

**Almost half of respondents completely agree with government support for private households if they use renewable energies (for heating and electricity generation),** another 42% would tend to agree; only 12% would reject this (although this figure is 25% for Denmark and 21% for Sweden, the Czech Republic and the USA). Opposition to such measures in the area of **housing** is around twice as high in the USA as the average; the situation is similar in the Czech Republic. But even there, stable majorities of at least three-quarters of respondents agree with such measures.

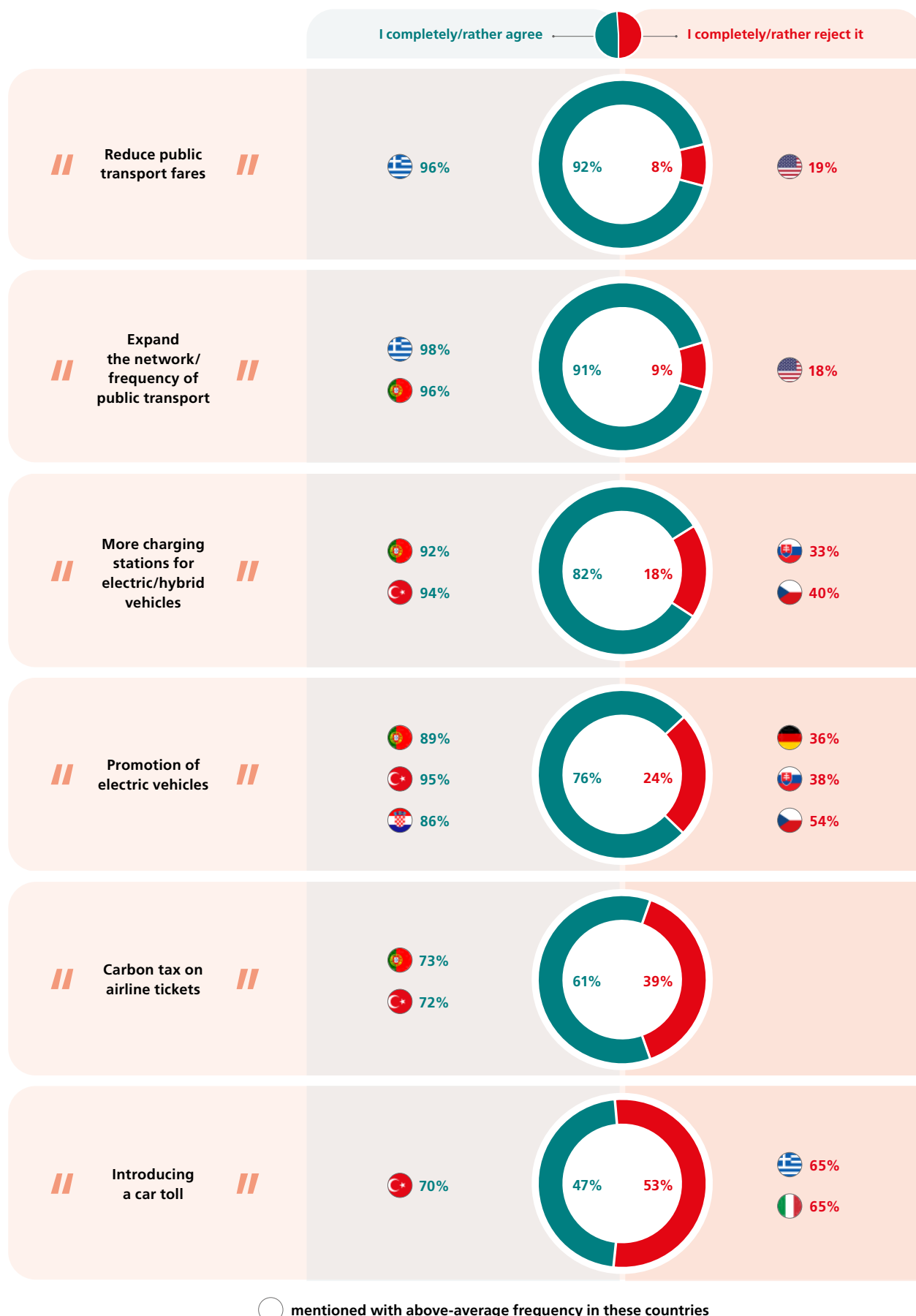
It is very clear here that restructuring will not come at zero cost to the state. In view of the limited financial leeway and considerable additional expenditure in other policy areas such as security and defence or care and education, there may be conflicts of interest for the state. **At the same time, the results make it very clear that for the respondents there is no way around social cushioning and a state-supported structural policy.**

A total of 85% agree with legal regulations for the energy efficiency of electrical household appliances (e.g. energy class refrigerator); at 73% this figure is lowest, but still quite high, in Germany and the USA. Among the *Adaptive Navigators* milieu, less than one-third (29%) completely agree, while more than half (55%) of the *Intellectuals* milieu agrees. **Helping consumers to make purchasing decisions through appealing labelling is therefore apparently an accepted regulatory approach.**

**The construction of more wind turbines is supported by 85% (46% completely agree), membership in an energy community or cooperative by 83% (31% completely agree) and compulsory solar energy for public buildings and new private buildings by 82% (42% completely agree).** Significantly higher rates were recorded in Turkey and Portugal (also Croatia for solar), but lower levels in Germany, the Czech Republic and Sweden for both energy sources, France for wind power and Poland for mandatory solar.

**Almost 9 out of 10 respondents agree with support programmes that help businesses switch to climate-friendly production processes and products.** 92% are

Figure 8  
Assessment of measures in the area of mobility



Basis: 22,823 cases, total sample; figures in %; There are various proposals to advance climate and environmental protection. To what extent do you support the following measures? Response categories "I am completely in favour" and "I am somewhat in favour"

in agreement with greater support for the development of climate-friendly products and technologies; 89% agree with labelling climate-friendly products. **This shows that the path taken towards a circular economy with the high importance of sustainable products and generally accessible information regarding materials and processing meets with a high level of approval among the population.**

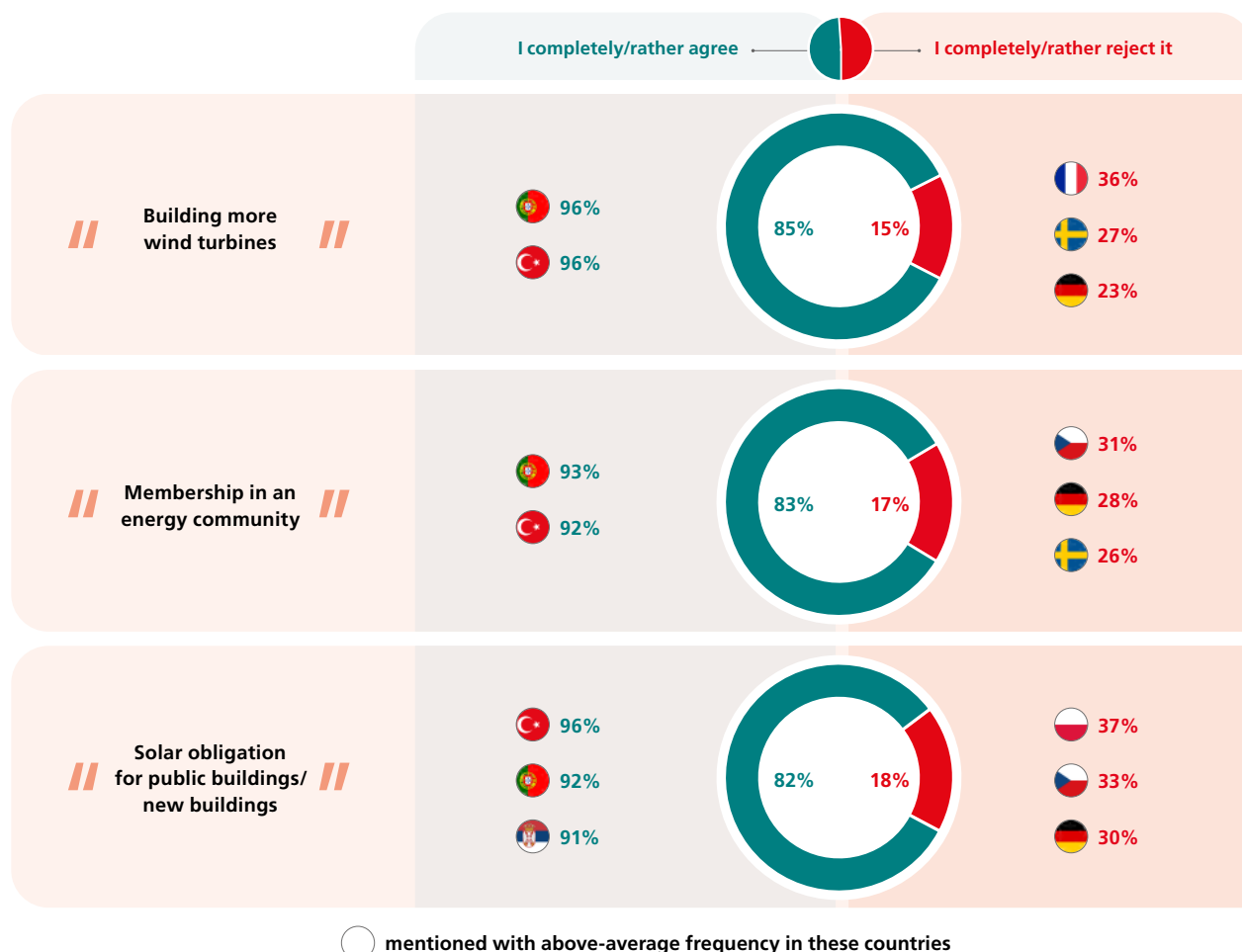
There is also a high level of approval for further supporting measures. 92% agree with **improving environmental and climate protection education in schools** (these figures are significantly higher in southern Europe; Germany has the lowest approval rating at 85%). **89% are in favour of “training/retraining/reskilling opportunities for workers in occupations that will no longer be needed in the future”.** Here, the approval ratings are significantly higher in southern Europe and significantly lower in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the USA.

If climate protection measures result in higher costs, the statements begin to vary more strongly depending on the type of measure, country and milieu. **65% agree with making climate-damaging products more expensive**

(25% completely agree, 40% somewhat agree). Support is particularly high in Turkey (86%) and Portugal (76%). Only in France does a majority (58%) oppose such an increase in prices. The milieus of *Consumer Materialists* and *Conventional Mainstream* have below-average approval ratings, while *Intellectuals*, *Established* and *Progressive Realists* have above-average approval ratings. **A carbon tax on airline tickets is still approved by 60%, while only 47% would tend to agree with a car toll (“rather agree”) so that people who drive a lot have to pay more.** The milieu of *Intellectuals* is significantly more likely to approve of price increases such as an air travel tax and car toll. While the *Adaptive Navigators* are below average in their approval of an air travel tax, the three milieus in the lower social status and that are at least partly traditionally orientated (*Traditionals*, *Conventional Mainstream* and *Consumer Materialists*) are below average in approving of a car toll.

**As many as 72% agree with reducing subsidies that are harmful to the climate (with 30% fully in favour).** The lowest approval ratings are in Croatia (50% completely or would rather agree), Sweden (56%), Germany (64%) and France and the Czech Republic (both 65%). Here, practice has shown that “subsidy reduction” is not seen and

Figure 9  
Assessment of measures in the area of energy



Basis: 22,823 cases, total sample; figures in %; There are various proposals to advance climate and environmental protection. To what extent do you support the following measures? Response categories “I am completely in favour” and “I am somewhat in favour”

felt the same for different groups of the population and businesses – a commuter allowance is rated differently than subsidies for industry. The question of social impact and countermeasures remains relevant here as well.

## BOOM OR BUST FOR BUSINESSES?

Both **barriers** and **motivators** for a climate-neutral transformation can be found in the assumed effects on businesses – critics among the respondents point to possible negative consequences for companies, for example due to cost increases and structural changes, while supporters emphasise the growing competitiveness resulting from ecological modernisation. This topical area was also surveyed along the same lines.

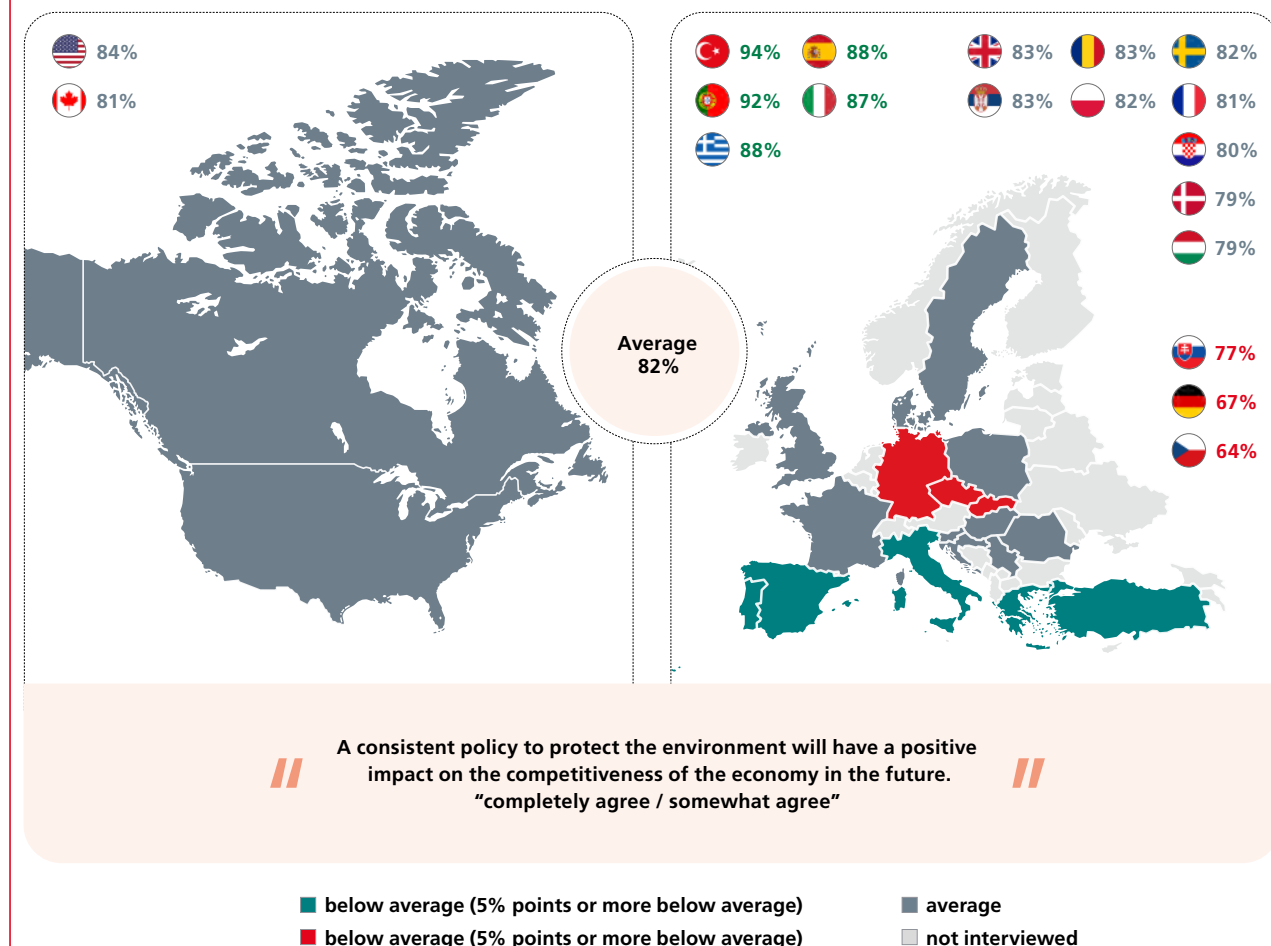
**After all, 30% fully agree and a further 52% somewhat agree that a consistent policy to protect the environment will have a positive impact on the competitiveness of the economy in the future.** It should come as no surprise that these figures are the furthest below average in Germany and the Czech Republic – two countries whose industries have come under massive pressure as a result of the energy price crisis.

**Furthermore, 85% agree with the statement that our economy must become more climate-friendly, as otherwise there is a risk of economic harm.** Agreement is highest in the south, namely in Turkey, Portugal, Italy and Greece. The lowest rates are found in the Czech Republic, Germany and the USA. Overall, however, these high levels of concurrence make it clear that this narrative of a climate-friendly economic policy is very popular with the population.

However, 52% of respondents also say that companies that require a lot of energy for their production cannot implement strict climate protection requirements. These responses are highest for the Czech Republic, Turkey and Hungary, and lowest in Denmark, Canada, Spain, Portugal and Italy. There is clearly a need to demonstrate more clearly how feasible solutions for these industries can be realised in practice.

67% state that politicians excessively tow the line of industry and business. **83% believe that politicians must exert greater pressure on business and industry in order to bring about climate-friendly production methods (37% strongly agree, 46% somewhat agree).** This figure is lowest in Germany (72%), the Czech Republic and the

Figure 10  
Impact of environmental policy on the competitiveness of the economy



USA (75% each). Concurrence is highest in Italy (88%) and Portugal (93%). The trend is clearly driven by the *Intellectuals* milieu (93%) and *Progressive Realists* (92%), with concurrence levels well above the average. Meanwhile, the milieus of *Consumer Materialists* (75%) and *Sensation Oriented* (78%) are somewhat more sceptical. The overall trend regarding all milieus is clear-cut, however.

Both politicians and businesses are clearly tasked with the need to present their own transformation efforts in a more credible way and to explain possible hurdles in a broad, comprehensible manner – otherwise a suspicion of lobbying will be quickly surmised and tend to linger, which could undermine the willingness of the population to make efforts of their own, not to mention the impact this may have on democratic convictions. The trade unions also have a key role to play here with their function as a link between the economy and society. On the one hand, it is important to publicly emphasise the importance of a strong economy for employment and prosperity. At the same time, it must be ensured that supporting measures do not primarily generate windfall profits, but serve the goals of climate neutrality and social justice.

85% agree that **the economy needs a clear direction to be given by the state** in order to become climate-neutral. This conviction is most salient in Turkey, Croatia and Serbia, and lowest in the Czech Republic, the USA and Germany. **This also addresses the framework conditions and the ability to plan – a field in which considerable uncertainty reigns at present.**

## LABOUR MARKET AND INDUSTRY – SUPPORT AND FRAMEWORK SETTING

The survey results indicate a desire for an ambitious and consistent industrial and structural policy that is backed by the necessary investments and offers appropriate framework conditions. 85% agree with the statement that new industries should be proactively encouraged in regions and communities negatively affected (e.g. coal mining, natural gas and oil regions) in the transition to renewable energy such as solar and wind power; in southern and eastern Europe, over 90% agree with this statement.

If there are no suitable alternatives for **the jobs affected by structural change**, 76% (with 22% agreeing with this statement completely) believe that these **should be maintained** for as long as possible. These responses are highest in southern Europe and France, and lowest in Sweden, Denmark, Canada, the Czech Republic and Romania. Among the milieus, the *Adaptive Navigators* have the highest approval ratings at 82%. All other milieus are much closer to the average in terms of approval.

However, 61% also say that **structural change measures should be carried out even if jobs are lost** as a result (17% fully agree). Support for this is lowest in the Visegrad states and Greece, and highest in Turkey, the UK and the

USA. These results, which would at first glance appear contradictory, make it clear that people do not disagree with structural change in principle, but that concerns about jobs are a far more tangible issue. It is not surprising that Sweden and Denmark have the lowest support levels when it comes to keeping one's job. **There, the employee is at the heart of it all, but not the job as such.** It is considered normal to change jobs and there is extensive support for retraining. This is probably also a key to these sensitive issues surrounding ecological modernisation: **positive, sustainable local prospects and trust in social security are needed. A restructuring of the economy will then be perceived as less ominous.**

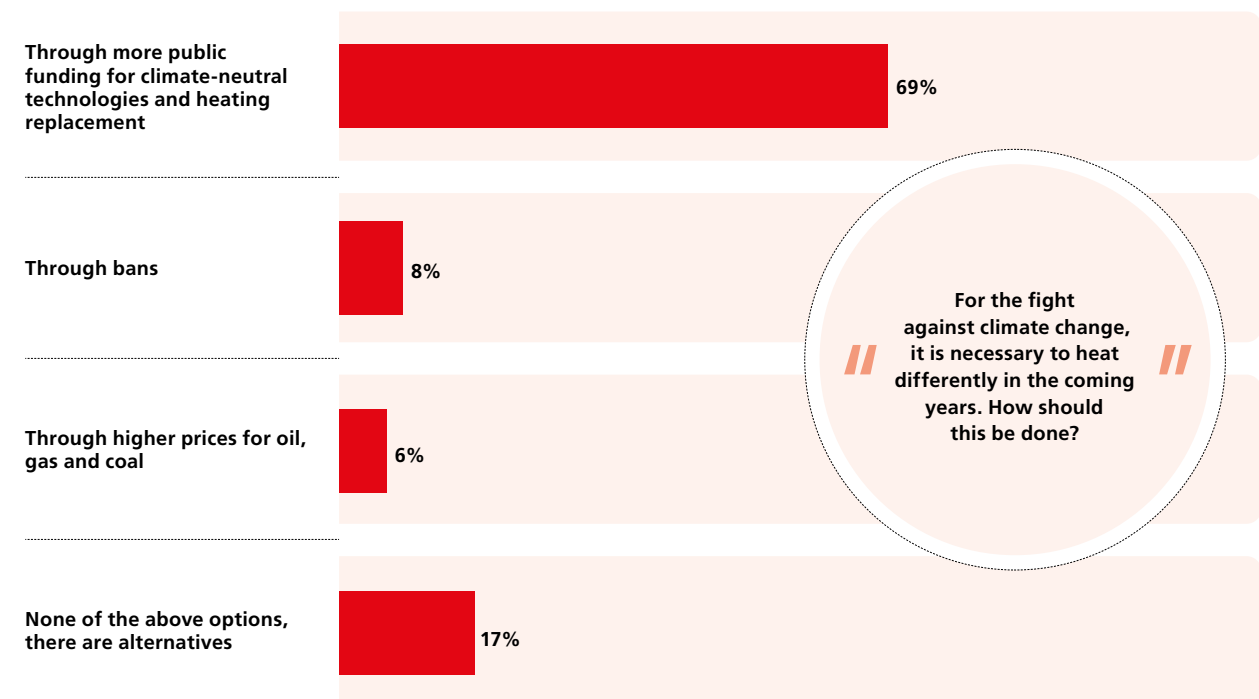
94% of respondents are in favour of support to employees affected by the change of electricity and heat supply to renewable energy (e.g. in case of job loss), for example in the form of retraining for alternative jobs. Concurrence is highest in Hungary (94%) and lowest in the USA (80%). Here too, however, there are considerable differences in social milieus. Most sceptical are the *Adaptive Navigators* (only 33% fully agree) and the *Sensation Oriented* (39%). Among *Intellectuals*, on the other hand, 67% completely agree. 9 out of 10 respondents agree that in the transition to renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, etc., the employees affected (e.g. in the form of job losses) should receive financial support such as compensation payments, redundancy payments or similar. This is fully affirmed by 45%, whereby this response is higher in south-east Europe. In terms of milieu, the *Adaptive Navigators* have the lowest affirmation rate at 37%. Involving the workforce in the practical design of structural change, ambitious training and further education programmes and social security for the workers negatively affected are therefore of immense importance in terms of social acceptance.

## ROLE MODELS MOTIVATE, PROHIBITIONS ARE A TURN-OFF

While financial support or compensation, whether for individuals or companies, is very popular, bans or higher prices are less popular. When asked how the heating transition should take place, **only 8% and 6%, respectively, see this as the most suitable means of combating climate change.** In any case, almost three-quarters of respondents agree with the statement that it annoys them when others want to tell them how they should live. **At 73%, this type of perceived paternalism is the number one barrier to climate-conscious behaviour.** Opposition is highest in the Visegrad states as well as in Serbia and Croatia; it is lowest in Greece, Romania, Canada and Portugal. *Intellectuals* are the least likely to agree with this statement (54% fully or somewhat agree), while *Consumer Materialists* are most likely to concur (82%).

People are more motivated to engage in climate-friendly behaviour by seeing what others do. Almost four in five respondents agree with the statement that they would be prepared to do more to protect the environ-

Figure 11

**Acceptance of measures in the area of the heating transition**

Basis: 22,823 cases, total sample; figures in %; To combat climate change, it will be necessary to change the way we heat our homes in the coming years. How should this be done?

ment if everyone acted the same way. This figure is highest in Turkey (90%), lowest in Germany and Denmark (70%), followed by Greece and the USA (71%). Interestingly, the values between the milieus are not far apart here. An above-average deviation of more than 5% can only be found among the *Established* at 85%. This is in line with findings from communication research, according to which positive examples are far more effective than simple prohibitions or moral appeals.<sup>5</sup> The survey results communicate the same message.

## WHO HAS A DUTY TO ACT? GOVERNMENTS AND COMPANIES AT THE FOCUS

Questions were also posed about the mandate and actual performance of relevant actors, such as the EU, national governments and businesses. When it comes to assigning responsibility for the actors that are doing too little (or far too little) to combat climate change, the EU is in fifth place in the ranking and therefore still mid-tier. Nevertheless, 56% of respondents share this opinion of the EU's lack of commitment. The role of the EU is viewed most critically in Serbia (71%), Croatia (68%) and France (66%).

At the same time, it also matters how the EU makes climate policy. For example, 69% say that they are annoyed that climate policy is controlled by the EU, as this does not take sufficient account of the special features of their country (30% fully agree). This opinion is most salient in Greece (82%), Serbia (78%), the Czech Republic and Slovakia (both 77%), and least pronounced in Hungary (56%). Concurrence is above average in the lower and middle social status milieus (with the exception of the *Progressive Realists*), and well below average among *Intellectuals*.

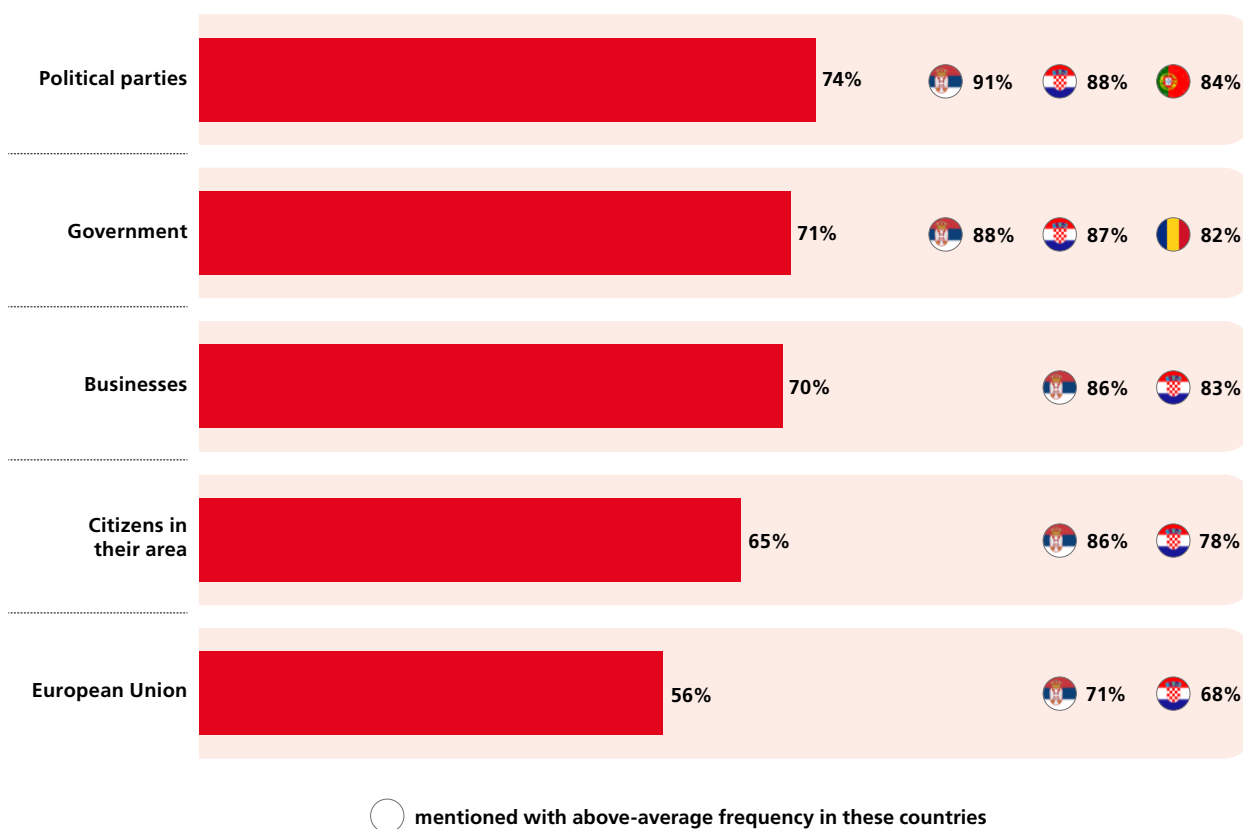
**Overall, political parties (74%), national governments (71%) and businesses (70%) are rated worse than the European Union in terms of their current impact on the climate crisis.** For example, 74% of respondents believe that political parties are doing too little or way too little to tackle climate change. This figure is highest in Serbia (91%), Croatia (88%), Portugal (84%), Italy and Romania (83% each). The figure is lowest in the USA (58%) and Germany (59%). Only 9% on average think that the parties in their country do too much or way too much.

63% of respondents state that trade unions are doing too little or way too little to address climate change. This figure is highest in Serbia (86%), Croatia (81%), Romania (75%), Italy (74%) and Portugal (73%). It is comparatively low in the USA (44%), Denmark (48%), Germany, the Czech Republic and Sweden (49% each).

**At the same time, governments are cited far and away most often (54%) as the actors that can contribute most to overcoming the climate and environmental**

<sup>5</sup> Endres, A. (2023): Kommunaler Klimaschutz zwischen Populismus, Polarisierung und Parteienstreit – ein Praxisbericht [Climate protection at municipal level between populism, polarisation and party disputes – a field report]. <https://www.klimafakten.de/kommunikation/kommunaler-klimaschutz-zwischen-populismus-polarisierung-und-parteienstreit-ein>.

Figure 12

**Attribution of responsibility: Which actors are doing too little to tackle climate change?**

Basis: 22,823 cases, total sample; figures in %; What do you think: Are the following actors doing too much or too little to address climate change? EU was not surveyed in Canada and USA. Answer options "Way too little" and "too little"

**crisis** (up to three responses were possible). This figure is significantly lower in France (29%), the Czech Republic (34%) and Poland (44%); significantly higher in the UK (70%), Portugal (65%) and Serbia (64%). Governments are not ranked first for their impact on the climate crisis only in Germany (first ranked: business/companies), France and Poland (local citizens) and the Czech Republic (science).

Companies (36%), local citizens (34%) and the European Union (33%) lag far behind as the potentially most powerful actors. In Germany 52% named businesses, followed by Denmark (44%), the UK and Hungary (both 43%); whereas in France, at the other end of the ranking, the figure for businesses is only 18%, followed by Romania with 20%. The role of local citizens is significantly above the average in Poland (47%), Croatia (41%), France and Spain (39% each) and significantly below the average in Sweden (22%), Denmark (24%), Hungary (27%) and the UK (28%). A quarter of respondents name local governments at the place of residence, highest in Serbia (35%), Croatia (34%) and Romania (30%), lowest in Denmark (15%), Germany (17%), Hungary, Italy (both 18%) and Spain, Sweden and the Czech Republic (20% each).

Germany has by far the lowest score for non-governmental organisations. Only 6% rank these among the three most influential players in overcoming the crisis. In France, on the

other hand, almost one in three affirm this. Political parties fare worst there, with 8% ranking these among the three most influential actors in France. The role of parties is rated similarly poorly only in Romania. Finally coming in last place, 4% of respondents overall rank trade unions among the three actors that can do the most to address climate change.

In contrast to most other questions, there are hardly any significant differences between the milieus when it comes to assignment of responsibility.

## BE IN IT TO WIN IT – PEOPLE WANT TO PARTICIPATE AND BE INVOLVED

**Direct involvement of the population in the transition to a climate-neutral future, whether in business or in local energy generation, is usually regarded as an important prerequisite for broad social approval.** We also looked into this. In fact, there is a high level of concurrence on issues relating to participation. **88% say that in the switchover of electricity and heat to renewable energy sources, such as solar or wind, citizens should participate in public and political life (e.g. in citizens' forums, planning advisory boards) in order to help shape the community.** These values are significantly lower, but still at a high level, in the Czech Republic (79%),

Denmark (80%), Sweden (81%) and Germany (83%). However, only 28% of *Adaptive Navigators* fully agree (the average is 37%).

**Just under two-thirds of respondents can imagine taking an active part in shaping the energy supply in their community.** These figures are highest in south-east Europe and Portugal (Turkey is the frontrunner with 90%), and lowest in the Czech Republic (46%) and Denmark (48%), followed by the UK (50%) and Germany (55%). Differences in social milieu are also considerable here. A high social status correlates with significantly higher approval.

**75% of those surveyed could imagine generating their own energy and a further 7% already do so.** Again, these values are highest in south-east Europe and Portugal, and lowest in Poland, the UK, North America, France and Germany. Here as well, approval increases with rising income; however, the *Progressive Realists* show the highest concurrence (85%).

**64% think it would be good to build a solar park in their community if the profits it generates would benefit the community.** These values are highest in the Balkan countries (73 – 76%) and lowest in the Czech Republic (45%) and France (51%). A further 31% would accept this. Opposition to such construction projects with local profit-sharing is only expressed by 5%; merely in the Czech Republic and the USA is this response in the double-digits. Wind farms face tougher going. But even here, a majority of 53% would still welcome such construction projects in their community if it were to share in the profits. In France, this figure is only 29%. Nor is there any majority advocating this in the Czech Republic, Sweden, North America or Germany. A third of respondents in France oppose construction even with profit-sharing (with only 12% stating this on average across all countries).

## DO THE NARRATIVES OF INTER-GENERATIONAL JUSTICE AND GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY RESONATE WELL?

87% of respondents agree that **industrialised countries have a special responsibility for climate protection** because they have been a major cause of climate change. The lowest concurrence was recorded in the USA (79%), followed by the Czech Republic (81%) and Germany, Canada and the UK at 82%. Here, the differences between the milieus are comparatively small.

The statement “in order to preserve an environment worth living in for us and future generations, we all need to take action ourselves and start changing our lifestyles” is fully agreed with by one in two and a further 41% somewhat agree. Germany, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Denmark and the UK have the lowest concurring values here, while Serbia, Portugal and Greece have the highest. Differences between individual milieus are more significant than differences between countries, with 40 percentage points

separating *Intellectuals* (74% fully agree) and *Adaptive Navigators* (34%). *Consumer Materialists*, *Sensation Oriented* and *Conventional Mainstream* also remain under 45%.

At the same time, however, one in four agree with the statement that they cannot see the point of changing their own behaviour today for something that might happen in the future. Appeals to intergenerational justice will be just as ineffective with these sceptics as citations of scientific studies. Differences in milieus here are considerable; the *Sensation Oriented* come in at 46%, the *Adaptive Navigators* at 40% (with *Intellectuals* being at the other end of the scale at 6%).

**Here it becomes clear that attempting to convince those who are not already convinced with the usual narratives is not a sure-fire road to success. Accordingly, future narratives on a climate policy transition should be more strongly aligned with the lifeworld of these milieus.**

## II

## CONCLUSIONS FOR THE CLIMATE-NEUTRAL REFORM AGENDA AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

Despite the urgent need for climate change to be recognised and perceived by the majority of the population, practical implementation of social-ecological change triggers a wide range of emotions, doubts and protests. These extend from general unease when it comes to change, fears surrounding increasing paternalism and personal financial burdens, as well as concerns about economic downturns and social upheaval, to fundamental doubts about the feasibility of climate-neutral transformation and growing fears about the future.

How should politicians and the public react to this?

### SHAPING CHANGE IN A SOCIALLY JUST WAY

In some milieus, the ecological issue is perceived as a threat to the standard of living that has been achieved. Many people are currently experiencing a general sense of crisis, as the future seems increasingly unpredictable. The climate-neutral transformation fuels this further. This feeling dovetails with concerns about the loss of traditional ways of life and the fear of not being able to maintain one's own hard-earned prosperity. There is a great fear of ending up worse off than before. This is why the notion of a fundamental change in our way of life and doing business goes hand in hand with mounting trepidation and fears of social decline.

Accordingly, the question of costs cannot be avoided if sceptical or even opposition groups are to be included or at least their impact on the centre of society is to be limited. Incidentally, this is not only about lower social status milieus; even in middle social milieus, the reorientation of society and economy is widely perceived as a threat to the standard of living achieved. This is all the more true wherever inequalities or unfavourable framework conditions cluster and converge. For example, for people with low or average income living in rural areas in poorly insulated houses with oil or gas heating, the question of costs quickly takes on existential dimensions. Resistance to change grows commensurately, offering fertile ground for populist forces to exploit. **There is no way around the issue of fair distribution of the burdens and costs of the transition. Shaping a socially just climate policy is key to overcoming social barriers and minimising social conflicts.**

Equally important in this context is the differentiated and varying call for individual effort and sacrifice. It should be noted once again that well-off milieus generally cause significantly more emissions. Milieus with a lower social status are well aware of this fact. A carbon tax for frequent flyers is one way of addressing this. The expansion of renewable energy should also be promoted in urban regions in order to prevent the impression that rural areas are supposed to unilaterally shoulder the consequences and costs of the energy transition.

### PROMOTING THE COMMON GOOD, SOCIAL COHESION AND QUALITY OF LIFE

The dominant climate policy narrative is that emissions must be reduced because otherwise the world will become increasingly uninhabitable. In practice, climate policy is primarily associated with sacrifice and the loss of familiar ways of life that are perceived as positive. This narrative is risky, as it fosters fears and resistance. **Politicians can only counter this by emphasising the social benefits of a social-ecological transformation and the positive consequences for the common good. What is needed is a narrative emphasising the benefits of a climate-neutral society.**<sup>6</sup> Approaches to this can also be identified on a milieu-specific basis: clean, green and more liveable city centres, higher quality of life through less traffic, better health through less air pollution, or more mobility infrastructure for the elderly are only a few examples. But the list is longer: better quality of locally produced food, intact nature available for local recreation, serving as a cultural asset and as an opportunity to identify with one's home town or region, inner-city green spaces as a contribution to climate adaptation and upgrading of urban real estate, etc. **Furthermore, climate policies are also supported by more sceptical milieus if they are compatible with life in a modern consumer society and offer direct additional personal benefits.** If sustainability is possible at no additional cost and increases one's own quality of life instead of diminishing it, these milieus will also be more receptive. Positive effects will also be derived if these new products are associated with a gain in prestige, for example in the case of ecological high-tech products and sustainable jewellery.

<sup>6</sup> Reusswig, A. / Schleer, C. (2021). p. 60.

Similarly, such an approach leaves room for individual improvements. Milieus with lower social status are generally strongly orientated towards the question of what concrete measures benefit them. Effective arguments for energy-saving behaviour, or the purchase of environmentally friendly appliances, for example, translate into cost savings, modernity and efficiency (e.g. lower utility costs through thermal insulation). This is all the more true when financial investments pay for themselves after a short period of time. Perception of trade-offs (e.g. “climate protection leads to economic damage and jeopardises jobs”) must be allayed, doubts about the feasibility of necessary measures must be dispelled and – in addition to public welfare aspects (see above) – direct additional personal benefits also need to be emphasised.<sup>7</sup>

## ACTIVELY INVOLVING CITIZENS, REDUCING ELITIST PERCEPTIONS

Material issues are central – but these are by no means the sole decisive factors when it comes to the acceptance or blocking of climate measures. The debate over social-ecological restructuring is also very much about recognising different ways of life and a feeling of injustice when individual achievements are denied recognition. Cultural changes called for and promoted by the so-called educated elite are often perceived as invasive by other milieus. Furthermore, many people feel that their own life experiences and everyday challenges are simply being ignored. **Anger and fatigue in the face of change are perceived much more strongly by lower social milieus. This must be addressed politically: The opportunities and benefits of ecological modernisation need to be distributed in such a way that they can achieve majorities.**<sup>8</sup> This is possible, for example, by expanding opportunities for co-determination and participation – for example in the form of citizens’ councils or transformation councils at the company level as well as involvement in value-creation. For example, in energy parks or through cooperative models.

If citizens are involved in decision-making regarding the design of climate policies and have the opportunity to help shape change processes, this increases acceptance of climate protection as well as trust and confidence in the political system. The journey is the reward. The basic opportunity to contribute one’s own opinion means that decisions often obtain support even if one’s own interests are not fully satisfied in the end. While not everyone actually has the aim of becoming active in a citizens’ council or a cooperative, the sheer possibility of having a say gives people the efficacious feeling that their own interests are being heard.

Therefore, solutions often lie at the local level. An electricity supply based on renewables is much more decentralised and small-scale than fossil fuels. This makes it more inde-

pendent and encourages more widespread use. However, this also enables or requires the involvement of many individuals in the generation and smart use of electricity. Citizens can generate electricity themselves, for example, either on their own roofs or through membership in an energy cooperative or energy community. The income produced can be used locally or distributed to the members.

This individual participation creates practical solutions. Furthermore, it offers a powerful image of democratic participation by the population. The role of progressive actors is to ensure that such models are also open to financially weaker strata of the population and not just reserved for the upper middle class. Lower social status milieus in particular need offers that effectively combine social justice, climate protection and the opportunity to utilise their own abilities. A certain hands-on mentality is typical of the *Sensation Oriented* milieu, for example. If members of this milieu feel directly affected, they want to have a say and be involved and also make a name for themselves. Many could imagine playing an active role in their community’s energy supply, e.g. by becoming a member of an energy cooperative – provided that they (also) meet like-minded people there and feel welcome and accepted. This is about practical action instead of abstract discussions with elites who are perceived as aloof and disconnected.<sup>9</sup>

## COMMUNICATE BETTER, AROUSE POSITIVE EMOTIONS, STRENGTHEN SOCIAL NORMS

The results of our multi-country survey indicate that many people would like more and, above all, more comprehensible information regarding climate policies. **Clear, honest and appealingly packaged communication is essential for the success of the climate-neutral reform agenda. Politicians should not play down the challenges posed by climate-neutral transformation, but communicate the magnitude and duration of the task in an honest manner.** This cannot be based solely on scientific findings and statistical data. Right-wing populists appeal to emotions, which is what makes them so successful. The emotions of the population must also play a greater role in the climate communication of progressive parties. This is not about creating emotions like in advertising; these are already in play. Fears and frustrations, anger and doubts must be addressed. The potential target groups for progressive parties are very large – and the field of emotions is commensurately wide-ranging. One cannot simply brush these aside by denying their right to be expressed. They can be disarmed by drawing attention to practical solutions that inspire hope, in which everyone is involved and of which we can be proud.

Both the challenge and the solution lie on our own doorstep – and that is where they need to be displayed and discussed. **Surveys show that many people rate their own cli-**

<sup>7</sup> Schleer, C. / Wisniewski, N. / Reusswig, F. (2024).

<sup>8</sup> Mau, S. / Lux, T. / Westheuser, L. (2023): Trigger Points / Triggerpunkte Consensus and Conflict in Contemporary Society. Suhrkamp Verlag.

<sup>9</sup> Schleer, C. / Wisniewski, N. / Reusswig, F. (2024). p. 27.

**mate-related willingness to change quite highly, but that of their neighbours much lower.<sup>10</sup> This presumed lack of initiative on the part of their neighbours can be expected to inhibit their own efforts as a result. Positive examples from one's own region, the local business sector, on the other hand, bring it closer to home that something is happening.** This reduces the feeling of helplessness that often prevails among many people when it comes to the topic of climate change.

Politicians should not leverage the narrative of “radical” change, as this fuels fears of loss given the level of prosperity attained in industrialised countries.

Furthermore, there needs to be a better medium to long-term plan with clear goals and intermediate stages as well as reliable implementation in manageable steps. Reservations and fears among the population arise above all when the impression prevails that there is a lack of concepts and strategies for tackling problems. If this is compounded by the impression that changes are being made as a result of erratic decision-making under high external pressure or without a well-founded strategy, i.e. “from one day to the next”, and seemingly without regard for the demands of everyday life, anxiety and resistance grow. In order to eliminate information deficits and avoid uncertainty, climate policy measures need to be explained in an understandable way, purposes and objectives need to be communicated and both effects and successes need to be demonstrated.

**Citizens must not see themselves as passive victims of the ambitious climate-neutral transformation. Furthermore, they do not want to be lectured to; positive examples from their own peer group are more effective.** People with similar interests, similar attitudes and similar living conditions have changed their behaviour and are succeeding with it. This message is much more effective than a raised finger. Appeals scare people off; social etiquette, on the other hand, catches on. People follow socially recognised norms; they want to belong.

## SHAPING STRUCTURAL CHANGE THROUGH ACTIVE INDUSTRIAL AND LABOUR MARKET POLICY

In particular, the survey results obtained in the area of economy and jobs would appear to be downright contradictory at first glance. On the one hand, there is a conviction that businesses cannot ignore ecological modernisation if they want to maintain their competitiveness, or that they will even benefit from it. At the same time, there is also a strong fear of the impact of rising energy prices and ambitious production standards on the domestic economy in general and

jobs in particular. **It is clear here that the population is not critical or openly opposed to structural change itself, but rather to its potential negative side effects for local companies and the labour market.** Just as social cushioning of the transformation is indispensable for private households if social acceptance is to be gained for the reform agenda, there is also no way around a strong supportive role of the state for the economy. This involves both reliable framework conditions that are planned and communicated well in advance, as well as the necessary financial security and funding for structural change together with appropriate training and further education for employees. At the same time, aspects such as clear communication and sufficient involvement of the local population as well as social partners with businesses, trade unions and the workforce play a key role.

<sup>10</sup> See for example European Investment Bank (2022). The EIB climate survey – Citizens call for green recovery – Calls for a green recovery. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2867/414948>; or Leviston, Z. / Uren, H. V. (2020). Overestimating one's “green” behavior: Better-than-average bias may function to reduce perceived personal threat from climate change. *Journal of Social Issues*, 76(1), 70–85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12365>

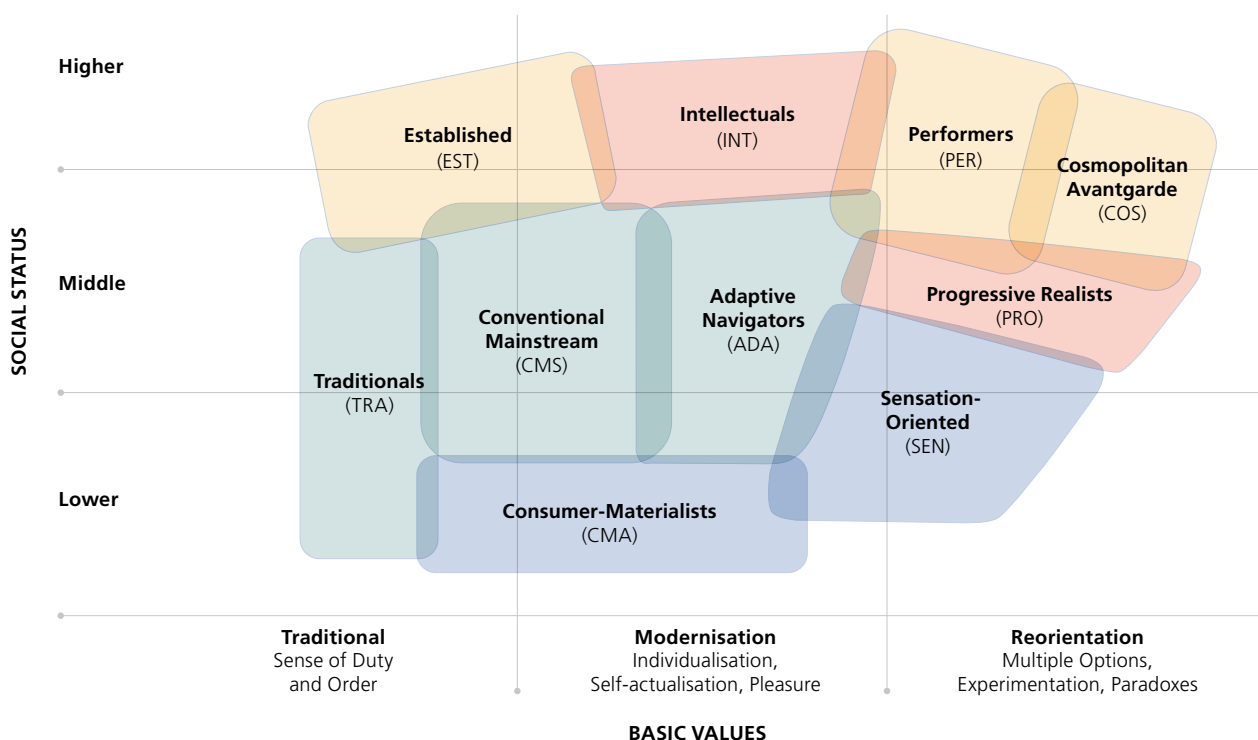
# ANNEX: MILIEU GROUPS, THEIR SPECIFIC BARRIERS AND RESONANCE POTENTIALS

The following overview and text passages are a compilation of direct quotations from the SINUS-Institute's final report on this population survey commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.<sup>11</sup> According to the authors, four milieu groups can be categorised as follows with regard to social-ecological transformation:

- The daily lives of the post-materialist *Intellectuals* and the mission-conscious *Progressive Realists* can be seen as the **primary driver milieus**. Both milieus are characterised by a particularly strong sensitisation to the risks of climate change. In their view, social-ecological transformation is a basic prerequisite for overcoming the climate crisis. In view of the pressing time, they are calling on politicians to push ahead more consistently with nature conservation, environmental protection and climate action (the *Progressive Realists* are particularly “vocal” in this regard). They explicitly agree with distributing the costs and burdens of change fairly. At the same time, there is a high level of willingness to shape one's own way of living more sustainably in favour of the environment. This does not rule out inconsistent behaviour in some cases, but the members of these milieus also self-critically acknowledge inconsistencies – and see them as an incentive for further improvements.
- The conservative *Established* elite can be seen as a **partial supporter milieu**. The members of this milieu have an open attitude towards necessary changes, but fear economic damage if climate protection targets are too ambitious. They are also reluctant to change their own sometimes exclusive lifestyle (privileged liv-

<sup>11</sup> Schleer, C.; Wisniewski, N.; Reusswig, F. (2024): Shaping the socio-ecological transformation: How social barriers can be overcome and how resonance potentials can be utilised. SINUS-Institut. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bruessel/21136.pdf>

Figure  
Socio-ecological change: driver, supporter and insecure / distanced milieus



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- primary driver milieus
- (highly) insecure and critically reserved
- partial supporter milieu
- (highly) distanced or even opposed

ing conditions, long-distance travelling, etc.). The modern economic elite of the *Performers* also agree with the goal of climate neutrality. However, they are less convinced – especially in comparison to the driver milieus – that strict and consistent laws are needed to preserve nature and the environment. Instead, they favour technology and progress – and the voluntary nature of climate policies. Although the lifestyle-affine *Cosmopolitan Avantgarde* milieu is strongly individualistic and anti-ideological, it can still be considered a supporter milieu – due to its urban cosmopolitanism, its interest in green trends (vintage fashion, upcycling, etc.) and its general appreciation of sustainability, which is also translated to some extent into political positioning and professional orientations. In everyday life, sustainable behaviour is supported above all where ecological rethinking promises an increase in quality of life (e.g. sustainable nutrition, environmentally friendly mobility).

- The (highly) **insecure and critically reserved milieus** include the stability-seeking older generation of *Traditionals*, the harmony-seeking *Conventional Mainstream* and the young, modern middle class of *Adaptive Navigators*. Uncertainty is increasingly spreading in these milieus in view of the perceived intensification of the crisis and the associated calls for change, which are perceived as diffuse. The need to adapt to changing times may be undisputed here, but awareness of the urgency of the climate problem is rather low. Although people express fear of the consequences of climate change, many also believe that there are more important problems in their own country (e.g. pension provision/elderly poverty, inflation/falling purchasing power, fair and well-paid jobs). As people believe that they will be worse off afterwards than before, the idea of a “great transformation” creates growing fears of social decline and the future. People are disappointed by politicians and the government, no longer feel that their interests are (sufficiently) represented and are annoyed regarding “wealthy elites” who want to tell others how they should live in the future in the wake of the climate crisis.
- While the middle-class milieus (*Conventional Mainstream*, *Adaptive Navigators*) and the *Traditionals* are certainly sensitised to the issue of climate neutrality, this is where the boundary runs to those groups that are (strongly) **distanced or even opposed** to the ecological issue: In the materialistic and entertainment-orientated milieu of the *Sensation Oriented*, the envisaged climate neutrality is primarily seen as an imposition that is associated with sacrifice, personal restrictions and a loss of joie de vivre. The members of this milieu live in the “here and now” – this strong focus on the present runs counter to the principles of sustainability. Although environmental threats cannot simply be ignored, little thought is given to the risks and consequences. The *Consumer Materialists*, who are concerned about participation, also regard climate change as a subordinate problem. Many live in precar-

ious circumstances (e.g. unemployment, health problems, difficult family circumstances), feel “left behind” and socially disadvantaged. In view of this, climate policy measures are perceived as unfair and as an additional threat to their own social situation. As a result, they feel abandoned by the state and fear that they will be left even further behind.

The grouping made here according to the degree of support for the necessary transformation must not obscure the fact that we are dealing with topic- and situation-specific approval and opposition in each milieu, which can be addressed. Even lifestyle factors and value orientations that initially stand in the way of a transformation towards climate neutrality can be used to bring about climate-friendly changes.

[...]

## REACHING THE MODERN MIDDLE CLASS OF SOCIETY

People live in social collectives that can strongly influence and change their attitudes and behaviour: By copying and comparing, imitating and identifying, individuals develop certain patterns of behaviour that express a personal connection with the community. This creates a sense of togetherness, a feeling of commitment to shared values.<sup>12</sup>

However, majorities in the population are not required to set social change processes in motion. For the “tipping point”, a committed, large subgroup that is credible and, above all, visibly in favour of change is sufficient.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the success of the transformation towards climate-neutral societies depends largely on winning over the driver and supporter milieus for concrete climate policies. Although there is broad consensus among these groups on fundamental issues, opinions regarding the pace and concrete measures can differ widely [...]. Depending on the (interest) situation, criticism is voiced, for example regarding deficits in implementation and a lack of consistency (e.g. insufficient consideration of nature conservation issues). However, people often act on their own initiative, e.g. through personal, corporate or municipal initiatives. The driver milieus of the *Intellectuals* and *Progressive Realists* are particularly willing to change. With their activities, both in the private and public sphere, they have the potential to influence the supporter milieus, as they have in common the desire to take on a pioneering role in society – the *Established* as a responsible

<sup>12</sup> Schleer, C. (2014): Corporate Social Responsibility und die Kaufentscheidung der Konsumenten. Wann und warum berücksichtigen Konsumenten CSR-Kriterien bei ihren Kaufentscheidungen? [Corporate social responsibility and consumers' purchasing decisions. When and why do consumers take CSR criteria into account when making purchasing decisions?] Berlin: Springer Gabler. p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Centola, D. et al. (2018). Experimental evidence for tipping points in social convention. *Science*, 360 (6393), pp. 1116–1119; Gladwell, M. (2006): *The Tipping Point*. How little things can make a big difference. Hachette Book Group USA.

performance elite, the *Performers* as progress-oriented “early adopters” and the *Cosmopolitan Avantgarde* as ambitious creative trendsetters.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the transformation cannot be successful as an “elite project”. To minimise resistance and counterreactions, it needs more comprehensive support in society. The *Adaptive Navigator* milieu has a central role to play here.<sup>15</sup> This milieu is open-minded, determined, well-educated, flexible, willing to adapt, modern and generally open to new things – and therefore “usually” easy to reach for the goal of a sustainable society. If we succeed in convincing the modern middle class of concrete measures, this will also have an impact on the adjacent milieus (especially the *Conventional Mainstream*, for whom the *Adaptive Navigators* are important sources of orientation). However, despite being fundamentally open to climate issues, the young modern middle class currently sees less the social advantages of a sustainable society and more the personal disadvantages of the impending change. For climate policy, this means: trade-off perceptions (e.g. “climate protection leads to economic damage and jeopardises jobs”) must be reduced, doubts about the feasibility of necessary measures must be dispelled and – in addition to the public welfare aspects (see above) – direct additional personal benefits must also be emphasised (efficiency, modernisation and cost arguments such as bonus points for using public transport or inexpensive rental bikes).

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<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, in the end there will be no getting around the need to address the large ecological footprints of high-status social milieus; they cannot be approached solely in terms of their positive ecological aspects without becoming untrustworthy. If the transition to climate neutrality inevitably involves a moment of renunciation (see Lepenies, P. (2022): *Verbot und Verzicht. Politik aus dem Geiste des Unterlassens* [Prohibition and restraint. Politics through omission]. Berlin: Suhrkamp), then it is precisely the high-status milieus that will have to do without. It will therefore also be important to develop a civil culture of conflict and debate. This must be wrested from populism, which in reality undermines it.

<sup>15</sup> See also Barth, B. / Molina, C. (2023): *Transformation und Beharren. Aktuelle Einstellungen zu Umwelt- und Klimaschutz, differenziert nach den Sinus-Milieus* [Transformation and resistance. Current attitudes towards environmental and climate protection, differentiated according to the Sinus-Milieus]. In: Fritz, J. and Tomaschek, N. (eds.): *Partizipation. Das Zusammenwirken der Vielen für Demokratie, Wirtschaft und Umwelt* [Participation. The cooperation of the many for democracy, the economy and the environment]. Volume 12, p. 147–158; and Borgstedt, S. (2023): *Die Sinus-Milieus als Instrument für Transformationsforschung und evidenzbasierte Politikberatung* [The Sinus-Milieus as a tool for transformation research and evidence-based policy advice]. In: Barth et al. (eds.): *Praxis der Sinus-Milieus. Gegenwart und Zukunft eines modernen Gesellschafts- und Zielgruppenmodells* [The practice of Sinus-Milieus. The present and future of a modern social and target group model]. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. p. 305–316.

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