

# Europe's open strategic autonomy

Striking a balance between geopolitical, socioeconomic and environmental dimensions

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## Policy recommendations

- Policymakers should adopt an extended conception of Europe's open strategic autonomy, including socioeconomic and environmental aspects. As policies trickle down to citizens and workers, public acceptance of related initiatives that also take into account social circumstances and environmental realities right from the beginning, rather than at the end, would facilitate the success of Europe's open strategic autonomy.
- Social partners and particularly trade unions should be part of the discussion as policies are designed towards achieving Europe's open strategic autonomy with implications for the workforce and investment in strategic sectors during twin transitions.
- A transformative mindset is needed to strike a balance between societal needs and disruptions caused by digital and green transitions in a way that ensures that initiatives result in a win-win situation for citizens and environment, reducing vulnerabilities and external dependencies by keeping global trade and partnerships within the open strategic autonomy framework.

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the EU's external dependencies and deepened existing vulnerabilities, leading to a major health crisis and consequent socioeconomic challenges. Similarly, increasing infection rates and subsequent lockdown measures have led to disruptions in supply chains, impacting the manufacturing of critical goods and products in a wide range of sectors, ranging from pharmaceutical to industrial machinery production. It is in this context of the pandemic and external dependencies, coupled with the current Commission's overall ambition to be a geopolitical actor, that the concept of open strategic autonomy has come to the surface in the European policy discourse.

To date, a number of definitions and conceptualisations of open strategic autonomy have been offered in policy and academic literature. For example, the European Commission's Communication on the Next Generation EU<sup>1</sup> specifically mentions that the EU will pursue a model of open strategic autonomy, which is understood as a broader concept that will imply 'shaping the system of global economic governance and developing mutually beneficial bilateral relations, while protecting ourselves from unfair and abusive practices. This will also help us diversify and solidify global supply chains to protect us from future crises' (European Commission 2020). In a recent study by the European Parliament (Anghel et al. 2020), open strategic autonomy is defined as 'the ability to act autonomously, to rely on one's own resources in key strategic areas and to cooperate with partners whenever needed'. Similarly, Grevi (2019) considers that open strategic autonomy is about being able to set objectives, make decisions and 'mobilise the necessary resources in ways that do not primarily depend on the decisions and assets of others'.

Although open strategic autonomy might require, for example, the repatriation of strategic industries back to the EU to a certain extent, it should not imply that global trade or partnerships will be jeopardised. If implemented carefully, putting the social and environmental dimensions at the centre, together with the (geo)political, economic and technological dimensions, open strategic autonomy might in fact serve as a tool for improving social and environmental standards globally. In other words, open strategic autonomy can offer an opportunity, on one hand, to reconsider an 'old debate' with a new way of thinking, in which social and environmental standards come to the centre of policy design. At the same time, it might also push the EU strategically to reconsider its position in global value chains without hampering trade, but ensuring that the latter becomes fairer and by alleviating its external dependencies and vulnerabilities.

While the notion of open strategic autonomy – despite its ambitious but evolving nature – still needs to be made more concrete, this policy brief

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, Europe has come up with an unprecedented crisis response approach, NextGenerationEU, which is the 750 billion euro (€) temporary instrument designed to boost the recovery and 'help repair the immediate economic and social damage brought about by the coronavirus pandemic' in order to achieve a Europe that is greener, more digital and more resilient in the face not only of the current crisis, but also future challenges. For more detail, see [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en)

argues that it should be understood in broader terms, beyond the geopolitical, technological and economic domains to incorporate socioeconomic and environmental considerations to better reflect societal challenges and global realities. It discusses the fact that social acceptance and public support for initiatives and policies under the aegis of open strategic autonomy is necessary to minimise social discontent. It also argues that the environmental dimension constitutes a key aspect of open strategic autonomy on an equal footing with the geopolitical, technological and social spheres, as ecological footprints define (and constrain) the ecosystems in which policies are implemented. A brief discussion is also given of the potential opportunities offered by member states' recovery and resilience plans, insofar as the design and implementation of relevant reforms and investments might help to advance the EU's open strategic autonomy in the face of the twin transitions. All in all, this brief recommends that more coherence is needed between what the EU wants to achieve with open strategic autonomy and how social, economic and environmental policies are designed, also taking into account various feedback loops across different policy fields.

## **Extending the framework to include socioeconomic and environmental dimensions**

While used in the past primarily in the context of security and foreign policy, open strategic autonomy has started to be considered across a wide range of internal and external policy domains, including trade, industry, energy, critical raw materials and technology (Van den Abeele 2021). Recent EU policy initiatives – such as the action plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>2</sup> and the renewed emphasis on social aspects through the Porto Declaration<sup>3</sup> or the European Green Deal,<sup>4</sup> including, among other things, the action plan on Circular Economy<sup>5</sup>, as well as experience from the pandemic – suggest that an enlarged notion of open strategic autonomy is needed to capture all areas of the EU's priorities. These priorities include (i) the European Green Deal, (ii) an economy that works for all, (iii) securing the EU way of life, (iv) an EU fit for the digital age, (v) a stronger EU in the world and (vi) EU democracy. Advancing the EU's open strategic autonomy goes hand in hand with leading the green and digital transitions; decreasing external dependencies and vulnerabilities by investing in strategic sectors; advancing sustainable development goals; improving socioeconomic resilience; preserving the environment; and protecting fundamental rights and values.

From a socioeconomic perspective, it is important to incorporate the social dimension in the open strategic autonomy framework as any policy or initiative that forms part of this agenda eventually trickles down to citizens (and workers) who are subject to the decisions taken at a higher level. This would also help to

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2 See: <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/empl/european-pillar-of-social-rights/en/>

3 See: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/08/the-porto-declaration/>

4 See: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en)

5 See: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:9903b325-6388-11ea-b735-01aa75ed71a1.0017.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:9903b325-6388-11ea-b735-01aa75ed71a1.0017.02/DOC_1&format=PDF)

minimise the disconnect between policies and people and help to boost social engagement with policy initiatives. Designing policies in a coherent way so that they work for and with people, delivering on the principles of Europe's unique social market economy and promoting social progress would also decrease the chances of social discontent and divisions in society.

From an environmental perspective, extending the open strategic autonomy concept would make it possible at the very least to take into account the ecological footprints of related policies. This is because the latter might directly or indirectly impact the drivers of climate change, impinge on planetary limitations and thereby lead to a reduction in access to key and critical resources, such as water, energy or food. This could jeopardise human health and well-being and threaten international security and economic sustainability.

This extended notion of open strategic autonomy implies that it can serve to promote social and environmental values and to protect people and the environment in an international context characterised by divergent values and interests. Even though the EU by itself may not have the necessary resources or political power to reverse trends such as climate change or rising socioeconomic inequalities globally, it can – with like-minded partners – influence others in pursuit of social and ecological minimum standards in international agreements (for example, the Paris Agreement or trade agreements). In this way, open strategic autonomy could help to create an international framework promoting a better social and environmental approach to international relationships (such as fair trade). This would contribute to social justice and sustainability in a resource-constrained and interconnected world.

## **The need for strategic policies for well-functioning and fair labour markets**

One prerequisite of attaining open strategic autonomy is the full but fair integration of the Single Market. This would allow Europe to act autonomously in areas of strategic importance with its own assets, the most important being its citizens, with their critical human capital. Full and fair integration of the Single Market also requires well-functioning and integrated labour markets. A number of aspects must be taken into account, however, in achieving well-functioning and fair labour markets that might advance open strategic autonomy.

First of all, the intersection of open strategic autonomy and well-functioning labour markets implies that the EU needs to strategically define the areas in which future workers – including both native-born and migrants – need to be trained and skilled to boost innovation, stay competitive and thrive in the transforming world of work. To this end, forward-looking labour market policies that involve equipping workers with new skills for new jobs should guide the education and training curricula to achieve smooth and realistic transitions from school to work. Skills supply must also match labour market needs in relevant industries critical for EU's open strategic autonomy in the face of the digital and green transitions. Modernising education and training systems to make them fit for purpose in the digital age and expanding lifelong learning

are other key elements needed to achieve well-functioning labour markets. Ample investment in these areas will boost the EU's capacity and ability to advance its open strategic autonomy, allowing, for example, investment and production in strategic industries employing workers with critical skills. It will also increase the social acceptance of policies as workers are supported in new jobs during the twin transitions, reducing negative employment effects and socioeconomic resentment, as well as limiting social backlash. Social partners are key stakeholders to be included in the policy designs and discussions in these domains during the twin transitions.

Another relevant aspect is the risk of labour shortages because of an ageing population and shrinking workforce, raising questions about who will fill the jobs in the coming decades. Policy options include prolonging working lives through active ageing, as well as focusing on young people, who again have been hardest hit by the recent pandemic. It is essential to prepare the future workforce that will determine the EU's economic prosperity. Especially young people not in education, employment or training should be supported during labour market transitions. If the EU does not take appropriate and timely measures it will need – given population projections – to rely on external labour to sustain its economic prosperity and social welfare systems and as a consequence, its strategic autonomy may be compromised in the future.

## **Strategic importance of reducing the ecological footprint and preserving the environment**

Climate change and environmental degradation pose challenges likely to influence almost any initiative on open strategic autonomy. For example, climate change is modifying the global availability of resources and sustainability of production chains with its impact on energy sustainability. It is changing the availability of critical assets and hence the provision of goods and services. Climate change also threatens agricultural yields,<sup>6</sup> increasing the risk of food shortages. In parallel, rising temperatures are causing rising sea levels, threatening coastal infrastructure and posing risks for the smooth running of economies in regions bordering water. On the other hand, droughts and heat waves lead to disruptions in food supplies, water resources and economic activity, as well as putting human and animal health or survival at risk. Climate change may also lead to the spread of infectious diseases.<sup>7</sup> All these environmental aspects have implications for the EU's open strategic autonomy by decreasing or threatening available resources and increasing vulnerabilities and dependencies.

Limiting the negative effects of climate change requires sharp reductions in greenhouse gas emissions (mitigation) and measures to increase resilience (adaptation).<sup>8</sup> In an effort to mitigate climate change and achieve a sustainable Europe, a European Green Deal has been proposed by the Commission. This

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6 See: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/figures/projected-impact-of-climate-change>

7 See: <https://easac.eu/publications/details/climate-change-and-infectious-diseases-in-europe/>

8 See: <http://www.oecd.org/env/cc/adaptation.htm>

aims for ambitious greenhouse gas emission cuts – amounting to 55 per cent reduction in current emissions – by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2050.<sup>9</sup> The proposed deal is very comprehensive, implying profound effects not only environmentally, but also in terms of economic and political relationships, industries and overall lifestyles.

Towards a climate neutral future, Europe's energy import dependence will be reduced sharply (from 54 per cent in 2018 to 20 per cent by 2050<sup>10</sup>), but there will be different material imports – where the EU's own resources do not suffice – in pursuit of decarbonisation. This will impact the EU's strategic autonomy by shifting dependencies: while there will be less dependence in some areas, such as fossil fuel imports, there will be more in critical raw materials (for example, for the production of batteries and electric vehicles), which are necessary during the green transition.

Moreover, the proposed Circular Economy Action Plan is essential for scaling up circularity in the system, keeping resource consumption within planetary limits and reducing import dependence on raw materials, by recycling used resources, reducing resource exigency, waste and pollution, and ensuring a well-functioning internal market for high quality secondary raw materials.<sup>11</sup>

All these and more actions are essential to reduce negative environmental impacts and preserve biodiversity and natural capital in Europe, thereby contributing to the EU's open strategic autonomy, reducing import dependence, resource demand and ecological footprint.

## **A window of opportunity to advance strategic autonomy through recovery and resilience plans?**

The digital and green transitions are already transforming European economies by disrupting the world of work. But it appears that the pandemic will leave long-term scars on top of ongoing developments. As an important part of the Next Generation EU, the Recovery and Resilience Facility has been commissioned with supporting member states in their recoveries from the pandemic crisis, improving their social and economic resilience, and preparing better for the challenges and opportunities posed by the twin transitions through a package of reforms and investments. The Facility requires that member states allocate at least 37 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, of spending to investments in environmental and digital projects.

From a labour market perspective, the recent pandemic has caused millions of job losses – some of which might be permanent – and it appears to have accelerated ongoing trends (such as automation, digital work, telework). Not all workers have necessary skills and competences to move to new jobs, however, or to be reskilled to cope in the changing work environment in the face of the twin transitions. An important part of that training and reskilling is supposed

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9 See: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en)

10 See: [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/docs/pages/vision\\_2\\_industrial\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/docs/pages/vision_2_industrial_en.pdf)

11 See: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1583933814386&uri=COM:2020:98:FIN>

to be achieved through investments in national Recovery and Resilience Plans, with implications for Europe's strategic investments in its workforce and critical industries. It might, for example, involve reshoring some economic activities back to the EU.

Recovery and Resilience Plans are also promoted as part of adaptation strategies against climate change, with minimum required spending in investments that should help pave the way towards decreasing ecological footprints (for example, through decarbonisation or energy efficiency) and achieving climate-neutrality by 2050. The success of the plans and strategies for climate change mitigation and adaptation, which will underpin the EU's open strategic autonomy, depends on the rigorous implementation of the plans, the rate of climate change, public and private buy-in of policies as well as the strategies of other global actors, whose actions might have spillover effects on what the EU does.

When implemented fully, the Recovery and Resilience Plans might serve as catalysts for boosting the economy and labour markets, as well as reducing negative environmental effects and ecological footprints. They may thus improve socioeconomic resilience and environmental sustainability in the EU. The success of these recovery plans is essential to enable the EU to advance its open strategic autonomy by securing its critical assets, sustaining prosperity, preserving the environment and improving its ability to act internally and externally.

## Conclusions

This policy brief argues that open strategic autonomy policies should take socioeconomic and environmental aspects on board from the design stage onwards, rather than merely integrating them *ex post* in existing policies. Public acceptance of related policies and initiatives will be boosted if they are designed to support citizens and workers during the digital and green transitions, promote European fundamental rights and values, protect the environment and biodiversity to reduce ecological footprints, and influence other global actors to do the same via international agreements that incorporate social and environmental considerations. The Recovery and Resilience Plans seem to offer a window of opportunity for member states to implement strategic reforms and investments that might advance the EU's open strategic autonomy. They would improve socioeconomic resilience and support member states in leading the green and digital transitions. But how well they will be implemented remains to be seen.

All in all, open strategic autonomy, a concept still in the making and continuously evolving in a changing global context, should offer a new vision and enable us to look strategically into the future and encompass a wide range of policy tools and domains. Transformative thinking is also needed to discuss and understand Europe's and other actors' values and interests, openly communicate trade-offs or implications of related policies, and carefully manage the expectations of citizens and workers.

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