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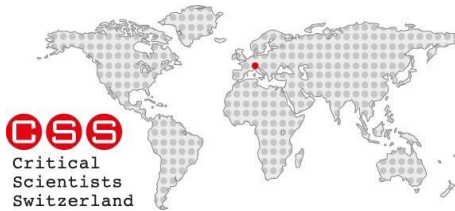


OF ATHENS

Research Center for Atmospheric Physics and Climatology



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Science and policy: Issues of framing, authority, evidence and political-economic decision making

Report of the Round Table held in the EU Parliament,
Brussels, 24 March 2026

Links:

[Programme and slide presentations](#)

[Video recordings of the whole event](#)

In order to create clarity about the complex relationship between science and policy, ENSSER held a Round Table with members of the European Parliament, representatives of the European Commission, scientists and others. The report of our conference about the same topic, held in Athens in May 2025, was presented and discussed at the Round Table.

This report specifically states, first, that academic science, due to current funding channels, has become dominated by industrial corporations. Further, official scientific advisors to governments are often closely aligned with the same corporations. This has led to an undemocratic influence of these corporations on politics, which is one of the root causes of the many current environmental and health crises. It has also led to a neglect of the Precautionary Principle, which is essential to the protection of public health and the environment. The report makes detailed recommendations to improve the relationship between science and policy, the most important of which is a considerable upscaling of public funding for basic and public-good-oriented research. Another important recommendation is that risk assessment policies (RAPs), with their underlying assumptions, are made explicit and decided in accountable ways.

After three ENSSER members summarised the Athens report in three presentations - the past, present and potential future of the topic -, members of three different political groups of the European Parliament reacted to ENSSER's report. Michal Wiezik of the Renew group stressed that EU legislation is often shaped by considerations that lack factual accuracy but serve the interests of various industrial sectors. He finds it deeply troubling that policy decisions are significantly influenced by competing interests instead of by a peer review process. Manuela Ripa of the EPP group stated that the gap between scientific evidence and political action is a real risk and that independent scientific

expertise must be systematically and systemically integrated into decision-making. Martin Häusling of the Greens/EFA Group said that the heavy reliance on third-party funding in European science poses a risk, and that it is important to support independent research into high-risk technologies with public funding.

On behalf of the European Commission, representatives of three Directorates-General also commented on ENSSER's report. Luis Vivas-Alegre of DG Agriculture and Rural Development remarked that the new Strategic Approach to research and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas, announced in the Vision for EU Agriculture and Food and planned for June this year, should provide a long-term framework to foster safe agricultural innovation and support the science needed for risk assessment methodologies. According to Alexandra Vakrou of DG Environment, this DG has established three platforms for discussion and exchange with stakeholders about biodiversity, zero pollution and the circular economy. DG Environment is also working to promote the dialogue between science and citizens in order to fight fake news and non-scientific theories.

DG Health and Food Safety, according to Klaus Berend, relies on EU agencies, primarily the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) but also the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) and the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC), for trustworthy advice, anchored in well-documented processes that involve highly qualified scientific experts and are underpinned by strong independence policies ensuring that opinions are unbiased and not influenced by economic or other interests. He denied that these agencies are often closely aligned with industrial corporations, as ENSSER claims. He specified that the agencies are encouraged to reflect scientific minority views (agreeing that scientific consensus is a contradiction in terms), but that the Commission follows the scientific majority view, for instance in the deregulation of New Genomic Techniques (NGTs).

EFSA itself, despite multiple requests, neither took part in the Round Table nor reacted to the report.

After the EU representatives, a number of other participants commented on the report from various angles. Prof. Christos Zerefos of the Mariolopoulos-Kanaginis Foundation for the Environmental Sciences (co-funder of the Athens conference and the Round Table) put the Precautionary Principle central, referring to its father Hippocrates's wording of it as "first, do no harm". Zerefos added that science and policy, when they come together, "can produce something wonderful or something terrible".

At the height of the European Commission's renewed push for democracy, Jim Dratwa of DG Research and Innovation is tasked with bringing together ethics advice, science advice, technology assessment and foresight under the heading of Science for Policy, counterpointed with the searching question of citizen participation. This serves to prepare the "Commission Recommendation on scientific evidence and public policymaking", which is part of the European Democracy Shield. Dratwa commented that, as for the interaction between science and policy, "we really do have a problem - things are not fine." Referring to the complexity of the issue, ENSSER's observations were "music to his ears". His task, which in the end boils down to answering the question "what world do we want to live in?", is daunting.

Prof. András Székács of the Hungarian Society of Ecotoxicology strongly criticised, despite Klaus Berend's statement to the contrary, the unacceptable abandonment of the Precautionary Principle in ongoing legislative propositions of the EU, e.g. the planned deregulation of plants genetically modified with New Genomic Techniques (NGTs) and the proposal "Food and feed safety simplification omnibus". In the case of the Omnibus proposal, pesticide assessment is simplified in such a way that the severity and persistence of side effects of pesticides are not monitored adequately anymore, which is very obviously not precautionary.

Glen Millot of Sciences Citoyennes recently chaired the advisory committee of the EU's Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators. Such assemblies are recent initiatives of the European Commission, supported by the European Parliament, to raise the democratic content of EU research and innovation. Yet, in what is arguably the EU's most important instrument for research and innovation, the upcoming 10th Framework Programme, with a budget of more than € 175 billion (almost double that of FP 9), no citizens are involved at all.

That politics often does not follow science when it comes to the protection of human health and the environment, is clearly visible in the EU's pesticide regulation, as Angeliki Lysimachou of the Pesticide Action Network Europe demonstrated. Although this is a very good piece of legislation, its implementation is hindered by a lobby of scientists allied to the food and pesticide industry. This lobby delayed the establishment of criteria to mark pesticides as endocrine disruptors by five years. And although the regulation entered into force in 2011, only in 2023 was the first pesticide banned as an endocrine disruptor. Even when the studies of the pesticide industry show a toxic effect of a pesticide, this industry tries to block its banning - and the Commission, instead of insisting on better implementation of the pesticide law, now opts for "competitiveness" by deregulation. Therefore this Round Table is extremely timely and relevant, Lysimachou said: we need to ensure that we do not deregulate the current protection of human health and the environment.

In the case of soil protection, it is not the Commission but the Member States who block progress. Andrea Beste, soil expert and policy advisor to the European Parliament, praised the Commission for proposing a very progressive and precautionary soil protection strategy in 2002. The Member States, however, have so far prevented this strategy from crystallising into law. The driving force behind the Member States is, again, the industrial lobby, now posing as a farmers' lobby, while the agriculture that is predominantly practised today is not at all sustainable for a healthy soil.

Hans van Scharen of Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) remarked that what used to be called corporate lobbying should now be called corporate capture. He quoted a chemical plant manager linked to CEFIC (the main chemical lobby in Brussels), as publicly stating that "access is direct and not complicated. I don't call it lobbying anymore. It goes as follows: the industry tells politicians what to do." CEO records the evidence of corporate capture in its publications. The current deregulation wave started in 2024 with a meeting of over 70 corporate leaders, EC president Ursula von der Leyen and Belgian prime minister Alexander De Croo in Antwerp, resulting in the 'Antwerp declaration' for a 'European Industrial Deal', which, Van Scharen said, is more or less a blueprint of the political guidelines of Ursula von der Leyen. In its recent briefing "The Pollution Playbook", CEO outlined the tactics that chemical manufacturers use to keep producing and selling toxic products - ranging from manipulating knowledge up to intimidating and targeting independent scientists. Public health policy makers should not be allowed to meet chemical industry lobbyists, CEO recommends.

David Gee of Brunel University, finally, recommended renaming the Precautionary Principle as the Foresight Principle. This principle was used only seven times in the 35 case studies in "Late Lessons from Early Warnings", the overview of health and environmental hazards from modern technologies that he initiated and edited at the European Environment Agency. Addressing the EC representatives present, Gee noted that the example of France banning neonicotinoid insecticides due to bee damage showed how minority scientists (on whom this decision was based) can be right and the majority wrong; so the Commission will make big mistakes if it waits for majority views in science all the time, he added. Also, the Foresight Principle speeds up innovation by decades; it does not, as industry claims, inhibit it. Gee advised the Commission to raise the portion of the research budget meant for anticipatory research into risks of technologies from 1 to 10%. He also argued for effectiveness evaluation of the EC's regulatory policies, and for analysing qualitative 'pros and cons' instead of quantitative costs and benefits.