



# The contribution of national advisory bodies to climate policy in Europe

**Effective action to curb climate change depends on well-defined and efficient governance systems. An increasing number of European countries have been adopting national frameworks to organise their climate actions, often in the form of climate laws. In some cases, these include dedicated advisory bodies to support policy-making. This briefing summarises key findings from research on the landscape of climate advisory bodies in European countries. It highlights the importance of ensuring the work of such bodies is effective by equipping them with a clear mandate, adequate resources and formally integrating them into regular cycles of climate policy-making, planning and progress monitoring.**

## Key messages

1. Of the many European national governance systems for climate policy, some only include essential elements required by EU or international law. Others are more detailed and include regular provision of scientific advice into national policy cycles. This is often done through national 'climate laws'.
2. While almost every European country has a national advisory body on climate change policy, these may differ greatly, for example in terms of composition and focus.
3. Ten countries have established independent scientific climate councils to monitor and advise on climate policy formulation. However, without a clear and visible role and proper resources, their impact is low.
4. Such bodies can play a unique role by combining various functions: watchdog, reliable information provider and convenor. Experience shows they can enhance the accountability of a national governance system.
5. Policy developments and decisions at EU level have consequences for national level climate policy and the work of climate councils.
6. Dialogue and cooperation among advisory bodies could allow for the exchange of experience and good practice and may help national governments coordinate on cross-boundary solutions for the transition to a climate-neutral Europe.

The findings presented in this briefing are underpinned by a full report, commissioned by the EEA. The report provides a comprehensive mapping of national climate change advisory bodies in the 32 member countries of the European Environment Agency (EEA), plus the United Kingdom, and frames this exercise with an analysis of their national governance contexts. The interim results of this work were presented to representatives of national advisory bodies in Europe in November 2020. The dialogue that ensued helped create a shared understanding of the current climate advisory landscape and provided new insights, which in turn were reflected in the final [publication](#).

## Climate laws and national advisory bodies: two policy innovations to deliver on Paris Agreement objective

The transition to net-zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions poses an unprecedented challenge for governments. National policy systems must aim to reconcile short-term mitigation actions with long-term goals, while tracking progress in an effort to remain on course. Moreover, to be ultimately effective, policy decisions must not only be based on the best scientific knowledge but should also allow for public and stakeholder participation to enhance transparency and societal support for what is an economy-wide undertaking.

National climate governance does not exist in a vacuum. European countries are subject to numerous EU and international commitments. While the Paris Agreement (re)emphasised the importance of a mid-century time horizon and established recurring global stocktaking, EU climate legislation distributes the emission reduction goal between sectors and among Member States. It also defines iterative processes for reporting on national policy-making, including the regular preparation of [National Energy and Climate Plans](#). Nevertheless, European countries are largely left to make their own decisions on how best to organise and structure national institutions to meet their targets.

To this end, many countries have turned to two concrete policy innovations: framework climate laws and national advisory bodies. Climate laws formalise government processes, often enshrining iterative cycles for policy-making, planning and progress monitoring, and assigning responsibilities to new or existing institutions. Advisory bodies broaden the scope of stakeholder consultation and, especially in the case of independent scientific councils, inject evidence-based input into policy formulation.

## National systems of climate governance display various levels of development across Europe

Despite common EU and UN commitments, European countries manage domestic action on climate and integrate scientific expertise in significantly diverse ways. An analysis of these systems helped categorising them according to three main tiers, based on their level of robustness (see Figure 1). Many systems only display the minimum set of routines to deliver on international obligations to the UNFCCC and the EU ('baseline'). Other systems spell out more formalised and specific systems ('light framework'). Finally, an increasing number of systems have dedicated climate laws ('robust framework') <sup>(1)</sup>.

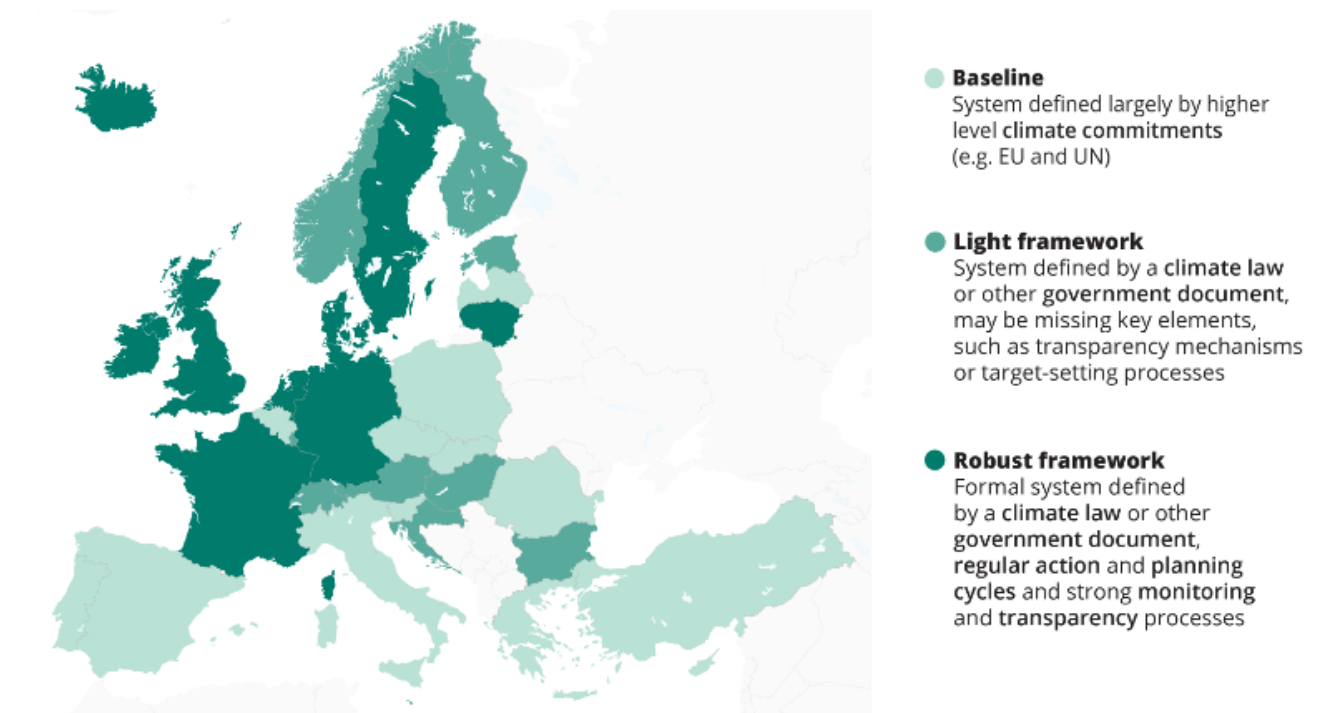
Many countries have recently changed or are considering further refining their governance systems, mainly through the adoption (or revision) of climate framework laws, e.g. Hungary and Luxembourg (new law adopted in 2020), Ireland (draft amendment to existing law presented in 2020), Spain and Portugal (draft laws at different stages of debate with formal approval as of early 2021) <sup>(2)</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The grouping of governance systems into three tiers is based on a methodological rubric, which looks at numerous governance elements, such as the existence of a climate law, national cycles for policy and planning, a concrete package of measures and national progress reporting. Of course, this grouping is indicative to a degree, as many factors outside climate governance affect the robustness of a framework. See the full report for a detailed note on the methodology.

<sup>2</sup> As of January 2021, 18 of the countries analysed had a national climate law in place. While most include a set of common elements, they differ strongly in detail and content.

**Figure 1** Three 'tiers' of climate governance in Europe



Note: Based on an analysis of governance systems of EEA member countries and the UK. Status as of January 2021.

Source: [Evans/Duwe \(2021\)](#)

### Almost every country has a national climate advisory body, with a role and mandate dependent on the governance context

The landscape of national climate advisory bodies is as varied as the governance contexts in which they operate. Almost all European countries have created at least one national climate advisory body<sup>3</sup>; some feature several different ones (the mapping exercise found 57 entities in 27 countries). Roughly half of these are dedicated specifically to climate with the other half having a broader environmental or sustainable development focus (see map in Figure 2). All 57 advisory bodies can be grouped into four types based on their composition and connections to government:

1. independent, scientific councils;
2. in-house scientific advisory bodies;
3. stakeholder engagement platforms;
4. stakeholder and/or inter-ministerial roundtables.

Among these bodies, twelve were categorised as independent scientific climate councils, specifically established to provide scientific evidence and knowledge as input to national efforts on climate mitigation (and in some cases, climate adaptation).

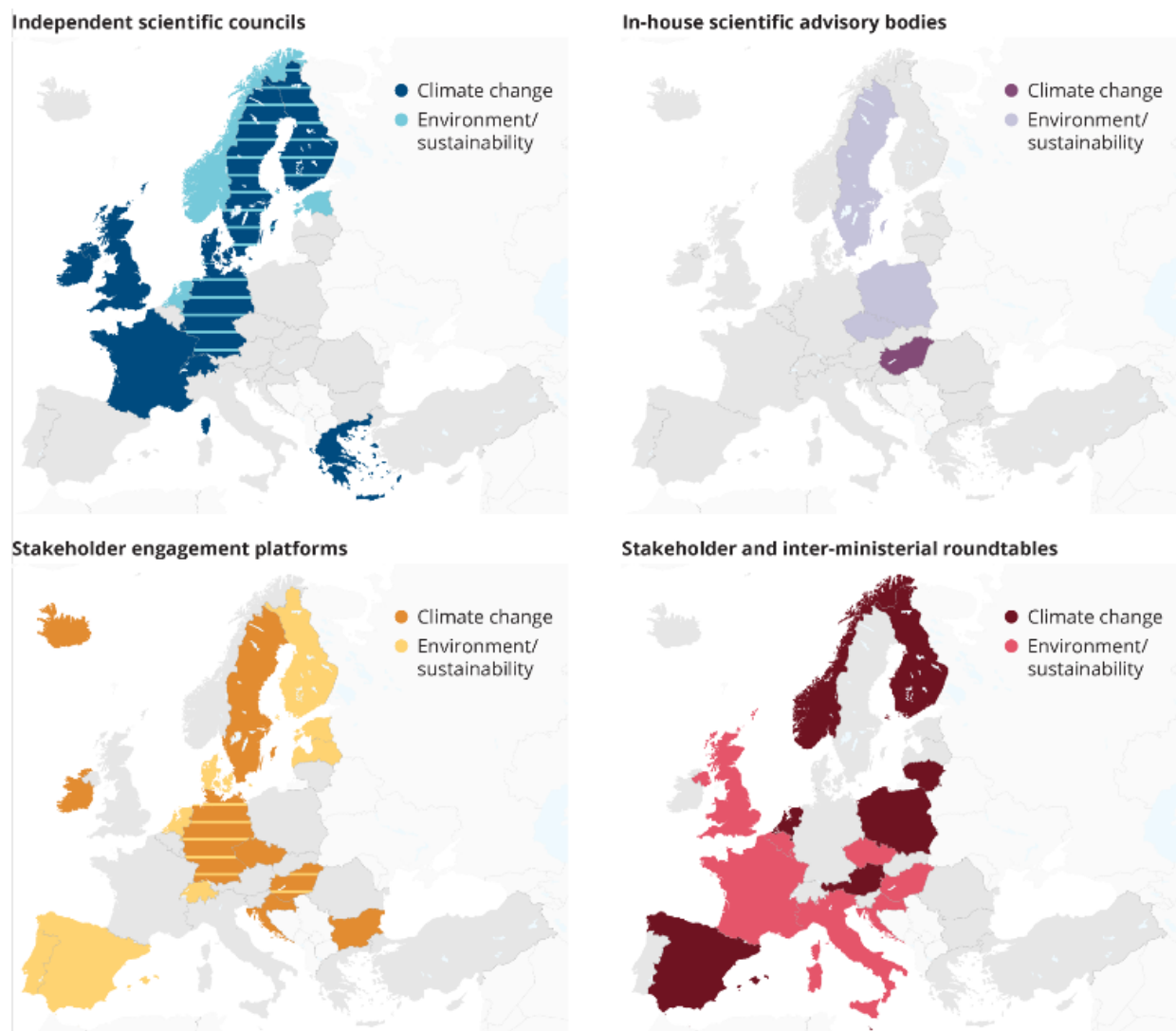
<sup>3</sup> In order to qualify as a national climate change advisory body for the purposes of this briefing and the underlying report an entity must: (1) be solicited by government for input on climate policy development, implementation and/or monitoring, especially when it pertains to policy evaluation; (2) engage in recurring and continuous consultation (i.e., not one-off or isolated) and (3) have a unique relationship with the government compared to its peers (if it is an NGO or research organisation), i.e., consultation is not based on an open tender/grant process.

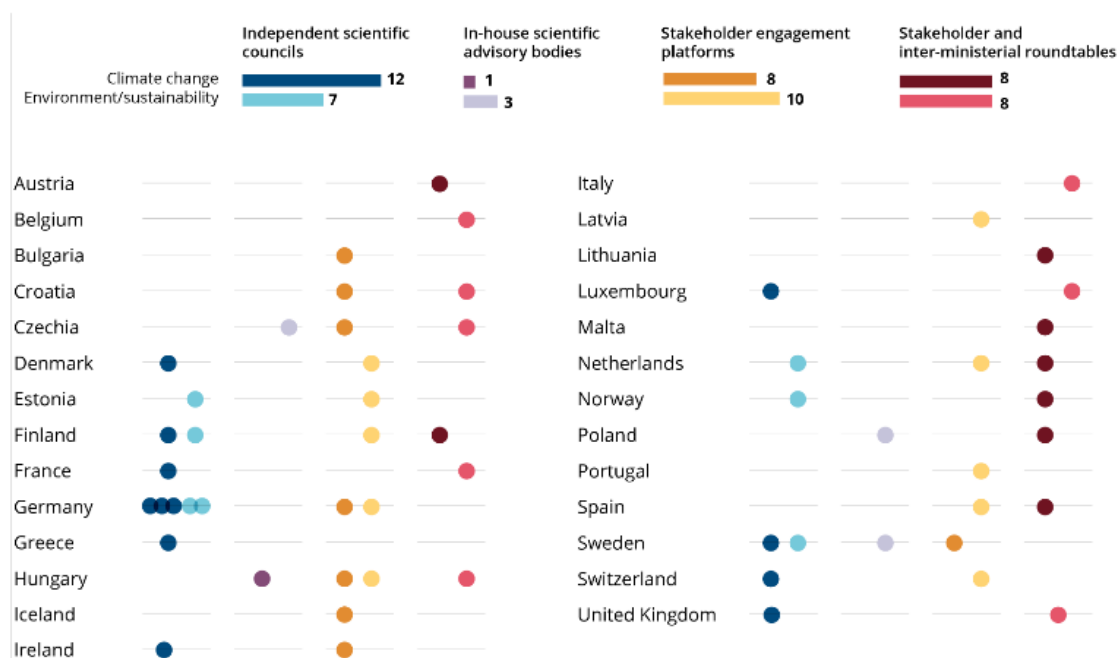
Any climate advisory body, regardless of type, is only as effective as its governance context allows. Recurring and regular cycles as input channels, access to different government branches and opportunities for outreach to stakeholders and the public help advisory bodies fulfill their mandate of guiding policy-formulation towards the achievement of climate objectives.

In some countries, the governance system is explicitly enabling. For instance, the Danish Council on Climate Change and United Kingdom Committee on Climate Change both have a high degree of soft power. This is not only due to an integrated role in policy-making (in the British case this includes concrete emission budget recommendations), but also because the government must heed their advice and provide concrete responses. In France, the government must respond to the High Council for Climate (HCC) but, unlike the United Kingdom Committee on Climate Change, the French council can only react to the emissions budget set by the government and not make proposals.

An iterative process for setting targets and adopting measures opens recurring windows of opportunity for advisory bodies to influence climate policy decisions. Without space for direct input, ideally with an obligation to respond on the part of government, advisory bodies risk being sidelined in policy design.

**Figure 2 Landscape of climate change advisory bodies in Europe**





Notes: Based on an analysis of EEA member countries, as of January 2021. Countries can have more than one type of advisory body. Slovakia, Spain and Turkey have planned but not yet fully specified advisory bodies. In the case of Spain, this is in addition to those already existing.

Inter-ministerial bodies or committees consisting solely of public officials were considered in the three-tier analysis of governance systems. However, these bodies can also have an advisory role if they include sitting external stakeholders (Type 4, e.g., the Austrian National Climate Protection Committee). In some cases, there is a fine line. The Slovak High Level Commission for Climate Change Policy Coordination, for instance, is formally composed of ministry officials (and thus omitted from our list of advisory bodies) but has ad hoc working groups, which involve external experts.

Source: [Evans/Duwe \(2021\)](#)

### Independent scientific councils add value to policy making

Beginning with the Committee on Climate Change in the United Kingdom in 2008 and accelerating in the lead-up and years following the adoption of the Paris Agreement, independent scientific climate councils are spreading across Europe. At the time of writing, 12 such bodies were operating in 10 countries. Independent scientific climate councils, are composed solely of scientific experts in a range of topics, including climate science, economics and political and behavioural science. The majority of members are full-time researchers in their academic field. The work of these independent scientific councils is conducted outside government and viewed as fully autonomous; they are often mandated specifically to serve an oversight role. Often, these councils were added to supplement an established tradition of external advice on environmental policy (e.g. in Germany).

Based on their mandates, independent scientific climate councils appear to serve three key functions in a governance context:

- 'Watchdogs' act as policy monitors, adding weight and accountability to climate policy processes through policy evaluation and targeted quality checks.
- 'Advisors' seek to improve climate policy by providing scientific guidance and making concrete policy recommendations.
- 'Convenors' engage stakeholders and/or private citizens through formal or informal channels to open up climate policy discourse.

In almost all cases, the existing independent councils have overlapping functions, with the convenor function being the least covered, especially where allocated resources are scarce.

There are concrete advantages to establishing a body composed of independent researchers and scientific experts in relevant fields. In their advisory role, such councils provide evidence-based recommendations that are regarded as reliable. Compared to advisory bodies that include government officials or stakeholders with private interests, there may be a greater perceived objectivity of policy assessments conducted by scientific councils. Furthermore, working outside government, they are often viewed by civil society as credible monitors of progress towards a country's climate aims — a check on government action or inaction. Independent scientific climate councils tend to be observed in countries having more robust climate governance systems overall, in most cases enshrined in overarching framework laws.

### Effectiveness of advisory bodies depends on mandate and capacity

The influence that an independent climate council has on policy decisions depends on a myriad of factors, including its composition, mandate, capacity and overall visibility in the climate policy discourse. Not all climate councils have the desired political clout or resources. Resource constraints were found to be one of the primary barriers to policy impact. The level of funding directly influences the size of the supporting staff (i.e. secretariat), operating capacity, depth of analyses carried out and capacity to engage with stakeholders. Numerous climate councils are unable to provide the quantitative detail they would like when it comes to policy evaluations and assessment of projected policy impact, both of which require in-depth analysis or modelling. Moreover, the specific (or unspecific) nature of the mandate influences the degree of influence that councils have in policy formulation, as well as their overall effectiveness in keeping governments on track and holding them accountable. A specific mandate, with concrete tasks, reporting requirements, and timeframes within which to provide science-based input, were widely perceived as facilitating an impactful role in the policy process.

### Cross-border cooperation and good practice sharing could further enhance national climate policies

European climate governance systems are marked by different levels of formality, specificity in their targets and policies and use of accountability mechanisms and dedicated advisory bodies. Although advisory bodies are constrained by their own national circumstances and policy systems, there is nevertheless a high potential for cross-border coordination and exchange.

The need to achieve more ambitious targets at the EU and national levels could serve as an impulse for enhancing bilateral and multilateral cooperation between national advisory bodies. EU policy changes have a strong impact on national climate policy making and thus affect the realm in which national advisory bodies operate and the space for recommendations they can provide. Moreover, the challenge of going climate neutral and even net negative is not one that can be efficiently achieved in each European country through its own solutions but requires regional coordination as well as European-wide collaboration and common policies and infrastructure.

This research and the accompanying workshop with representatives of climate advisory bodies indicated that there is a large appetite for continued good practice exchange as advisory bodies begin to take on additional responsibilities and roles against the backdrop of EU-level developments. Specifically, advisory body representatives emphasised the potential value of a continuous dialogue on evaluation methodologies, pooling resources and data as well as the weight and added legitimacy that a European network of climate advisors would have in EU policy circles. European organisations, such as the EEA, can play a central role facilitating this dialogue by providing a platform for regular exchange and working with existing networks to pinpoint areas of possible synergy and cooperation, at the regional and EU levels, in the uptake of transformative mitigation actions.

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