

Allianz Foundation Risktaker Pulse

How European Social
Movement Leaders Fight
for a Better Future

A hand holding a lit sparkler over water at night, with a green V-shaped graphic element.

ALLIANZ
FOUNDATION

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About The Report

The Allianz Foundation Risktaker Pulse is the first in a series of research publications dedicated to Europe's risktakers in civil society, the cultural sector and politics.

The Allianz Foundation supports social movement leaders, artists and other risktakers in their fight for social justice, open societies and a livable planet. To this end, the Foundation and its partners help cultivate an international ecosystem in which these committed individuals and their organizations can easily share knowledge, collaborate and receive long-term support. To be effective, such an ecosystem must be built around the actual, known needs of those expected to benefit from it.

As a first step, the Allianz Foundation commissioned social movement expert Derrick Feldmann and his research team at INFLUENCE|SG to conduct more than 75 hours of interviews with 59 risktakers in Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom. The report at hand summarizes their views, visions and experiences, particularly those commonly shared across Europe. The research, albeit exploratory, is intended to encourage a conversation among European civil society actors, funders and policymakers about what is needed to unleash the untapped potential of European civil society in today's age of perpetual instability and crisis.

The Allianz Foundation would like to thank all the risktakers who took part in this study. We would also like to thank everyone who helped the research team contact potential interviewees.

For more information about Allianz Foundation, visit allianzfoundation.org.

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Across Europe, social movements are fighting against social injustice and global warming.

Many seek to push government officials, industry leaders and the public to do more to counter the systemic problems of our time.

Prominent examples include Fridays for Future and Black Lives Matter. In recent years, these and other movements have shown that a promising way to support social change is to help the movements and the individuals within them. **The Allianz Foundation refers to individuals who actively fight for social justice, open societies or a livable planet as “risktakers.”**

Risktakers do not act alone. They are deeply embedded within non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social businesses, civically engaged law firms and other formal entities that actively support a given movement. Risktakers think and act outside normal channels, beyond election cycles, and often in the face of adversity or even open hostility. Their views, visions and experiences can serve as a valuable resource in today’s age of perpetual instability.

This first edition of the Allianz Foundation Risktaker Pulse captures many of these insights and offers readers a deeper understanding of what it takes to drive social transformation.

The report at hand is based on more than 75 hours of interviews with 59 risktakers in five European countries, namely Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom. The interviewees represent 59 organizations that strive to empower socially marginalized groups (25%), promote resilient and open democracies (25%), combat climate change (10%) or work on a combination of these and other pressing issues (40%).

The interviews were conducted between March and June 2022—a period that was marked by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Despite apparent differences between the five aforementioned countries and their societies, the research revealed some distinct pan-European patterns.

Present and Future Risks Facing European Societies

The consensus among the interviewed risktakers is that the three major challenges their societies are facing today are also the most pressing risks for the future: social polarization, structural discrimination and open racism, and Russia’s war in Ukraine. In addition, climate change was mentioned as an important catalyst that exacerbates these risks.

> **Risktakers in all five countries say that growing social polarization is the biggest threat to democracies across Europe.** Many fear that the ongoing erosion of trust and solidarity within and between European societies will accelerate the rise of populist political leaders and lead to an assault on civic freedoms—as seen in the recent attacks on the independence of the courts in Poland. Risktakers in the climate field warn that climate change could lead to further division, especially as regards the question of who is to pay for Europe’s planned transition to a low-carbon economy.

> **Risktakers warn that structural discrimination and open racism toward migrants, LGBTQ+ and other marginalized groups stoke social division.** They see controversial debates around this issue potentially contributing to creating deeper social splits based on identity and race. Here, too, climate change could exacerbate the aforementioned risks, as it may increase the number of people forced to flee to Europe, some risktakers warn.

> Risktakers are concerned about the repercussions of Russia’s war in Ukraine. Every one of them has felt the effects of the war and most have chosen to help in whatever capacity they can, for example by relocating refugees or helping the victims of rape and sexual violence. Several see the war as a harbinger of future risks, including the possibility of armed conflicts in other European countries.

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Sharing Knowledge for Social Change

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In their efforts to fight for social justice, open societies or a livable planet, the interviewed risktakers shared four key lessons learned that could prove invaluable to others like them.



Unleash the power of networks

Russia's war in Ukraine shows how partnerships within and across countries can exponentially increase the effectiveness of each participant and the network as a whole. For example, one risktaker leveraged her network of partners in Poland and Ukraine to get unaccompanied minors to safety. Another one promotes the work of like-minded partners in the climate field, aiming to increase their visibility and impact. The appeal of such collaborative efforts notwithstanding, risktakers stress that building and maintaining partnerships is challenging and time-consuming.



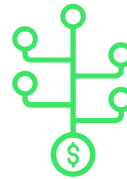
Tell a compelling narrative, also in collaboration with artists and creative minds

Risktakers stress the importance of telling a clear and accessible story about who they are and what they want to achieve. Many see great potential in teaming up with artists and creative minds, who are often risktakers in their own right. Together, they hope to craft new narratives that can break through the noise of social media and the 24-hour news cycle and to share them with new groups of people. One example is the project called "The Walk," which saw volunteers walking Amal, a giant puppet of a Syrian refugee girl, more than 8,000 kilometers across 11 countries to draw attention to the needs of young refugees.



Fight misinformation and disinformation

Politicians can and do distribute inaccurate information either by mistake (misinformation) or by design (disinformation). When the media accepts it—again, either by mistake or by design—the spread of information becomes a cascade of inaccuracies that leads to a misinformed public. Risktakers therefore stress the importance of fighting misinformation and disinformation by (1) building strong relationships with media outlets and media personalities, (2) using social media strategically and (3) liaising more directly with government officials, including at the EU level.



Diversify systems of funding

To improve their organizations' financial bottom line and flexibility, risktakers look beyond public and philanthropic funding. Several find that the larger social movement ecosystem can offer quick and unbureaucratic access to much-needed resources. Numerous organizations have already begun to share some of their resources, especially with partners who work more closely with certain communities or issues. However, while such efforts are described as fruitful, much of the regranted money continues to originate from public and philanthropic sources, whose funding rules often prevent such redistribution.

The experiences and views of risktakers can serve as an inspiration for more than just the next generation of activists and social movement leaders. They are also intended to encourage a conversation among funders about who they support, why and how their funding can amplify the voices of those who are fighting for a better future for Europe's next generations.

What Are Risktakers Fighting For?*

climate change education

diversity-sensitive society
social cohesion
climate action

active citizenship

digital rights

urban development
judicial independence

digital democracy

reproductive rights
rule of law
human rights

gender equality

biodiversity

civic education

freedom of speech
cultural memory
climate justice

anti-racism
refugee rights

freedom of speech
sustainable agriculture
countering disinformation

supporting the arts

LGBTQ+ rights
immigrant integration

anti-discrimination

*Based on the official mission statements of affiliated social movement organizations (see [Appendix](#)).

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The Risktakers

The Allianz Foundation refers to individuals who actively fight for social justice, open societies or a livable planet as “risktakers.” Risktakers are committed to a better future for Europe’s next generations.

Risktakers are no lone warriors. They are deeply embedded in the collaborative structures of social issue movements, including prominent ones such as LGBTQ+ Pride or #MeToo. Despite their public missions, many risktakers operate away from the public eye, representing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other formal entities that defend civic freedoms in courtrooms, create art to humanize complex issues, innovate climate-friendly products and services or provide shelter to people forced to flee from their homes.

Through these and other social movement organizations, risktakers think and act outside of normal channels, beyond election cycles, and often in the face of adversity or even open hostility. In these times of uncertainty, the views, visions and experiences of risktakers can serve as a valuable resource for civil society. Likewise, decision-makers in government and the private sector can benefit from their insights, especially when it comes to assessing and preparing for future risks.

In order to be able to share this first-hand knowledge, the Allianz Foundation Risktaker Pulse has captured the views and experiences of 59 risktakers in five European countries, namely Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom. These countries were chosen based on their individual, measurable exposure to pressing risks affecting people, society and the planet: Germany’s energy consumption causes more greenhouse gases than most other European countries. The United Kingdom ranks closely behind. In Italy and Greece, precarious work opportunities and unemployment present a serious risk for many, especially young people. And in Poland, political rights and civil liberties have been under attack, as comparative data confirm (see [Appendix](#) for details).

The goal of this research was to hear directly from risktakers in these countries about what they see as the most pressing future risks, what works in addressing them, why it works and how European philanthropy, governments and other supporters can best help them seize opportunities when they arise. To this end, the research team, led by social movement expert Derrick Feldmann, conducted more than 75 hours of interviews between March and June 2022—a period that was marked by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

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Selection Criteria

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Risktakers were identified via a systematic scan of European social movement organizations, which ranged from NGOs such as human rights groups and campaign organizations to social businesses to civically engaged law firms. In order to be included in the scan, organizations needed to meet three criteria, which the research team derived from the Movement of Movements project at Oxford University's Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship. Each organization had to

- > operate within at least one of the following areas of social and environmental change: (1) empowering socially marginalized groups ("People at Risk"), (2) promoting resilient and open democracies ("Society at Risk"), (3) countering climate change ("Planet at Risk"). Each organization's concrete mission—for example, defending women's reproductive rights or freedom of the speech—was mapped against these three change areas and its normative alignment with the progressive United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (see Appendix for details);
- > have achieved a certain level of maturity by fulfilling at least one the following social movement tenets;
 - > Leadership – the ability to effectively achieve their demands
 - > Instigation – the ability to pressure stakeholders and overcome opposition
 - > Constituency – the ability to recruit and grow a movement's followers and supporters
 - > Narrative – the ability to develop an effective narrative for culture or policy change adopted by policy-makers and other stakeholders;
- > be headquartered or have a strong presence in Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland or the United Kingdom.

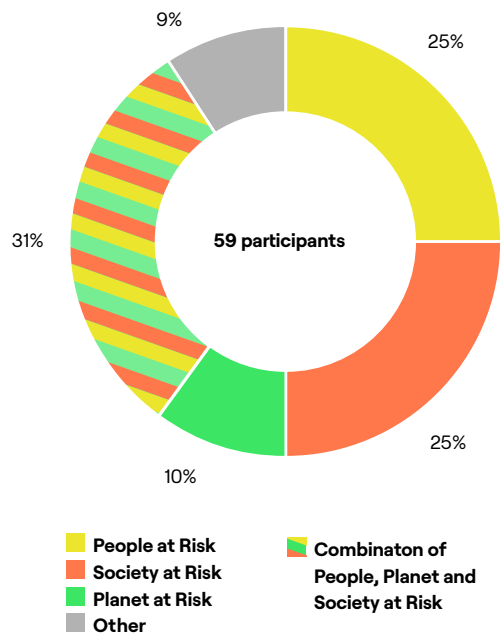
Researchers identified a total of 244 social movement organizations. Out of this sample, 162 risktakers were identified and asked for their permission to be interviewed. To be considered, individuals had to play a leading role within their

organization, either as a founder or a leading member or as someone who has used the arts and culture to raise awareness of a social issue or drive participation in the movement. In total, 59 individuals participated in the semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately 60 minutes and were audio-recorded using a video conferencing tool. After each interview, the researchers transcribed and analyzed the responses of those participants who had given their written consent (which 58 out of the 59 did).

The interviewed risktakers and the social movement organizations they are affiliated with are devoted to a diverse set of social and environmental issues. One quarter focus on empowering socially marginalized groups, such as migrants, people of color and the LGBTQ+ community (referred to as "People at Risk" in Fig. 1). A further 25% promote resilient and open democracies, for example by defending freedom of speech ("Society at Risk") and 10% combat climate change, for instance by scaling regenerative agriculture ("Planet at Risk"). Meanwhile, 31% work at the interface with these interconnected challenges and 9% are active in other change areas.

Fig. 1 Change areas of the interviewed risktakers

Source: Risktaker interviews



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In terms of geographical location, risktakers in Germany are slightly overrepresented in the sample, making up 39%, followed by Poland (23%), Italy (16%), the United Kingdom (13%) and Greece (9%).

As is usually the case with qualitative research, the following report refrains from using statistical analyses such as frequency distributions,

Personal Risks

Risktakers cannot avoid facing personal and professional risks as they pursue social change. The risktakers included in this report are no exception. Many recall having faced social media abuse, especially female and LGBTQ+ movement leaders, people of color and those not associated with a larger NGO. But attempts to silence them are not just limited to the online world and can range from harassment to smear campaigns to violence, along with phone hacking and having lawsuits brought against them. These attacks can have a detrimental effect on mental health, as one risktaker explains:

“Working in this kind of organization is not just simply a job. It takes much more energy than that because [...] people are going through very traumatic experiences and once this is someone very close to you it takes a huge toll on your psychological and emotional life.”

Đorđe, European Roma Rights Centre, United Kingdom

In some European countries, certain topics and traits can give rise to serious threats, risktakers say, such as LGBTQ+ and pro-refugee activism as well as actions to counter authoritarianism. Some feel that organizing people of color can make them particularly susceptible to threats.

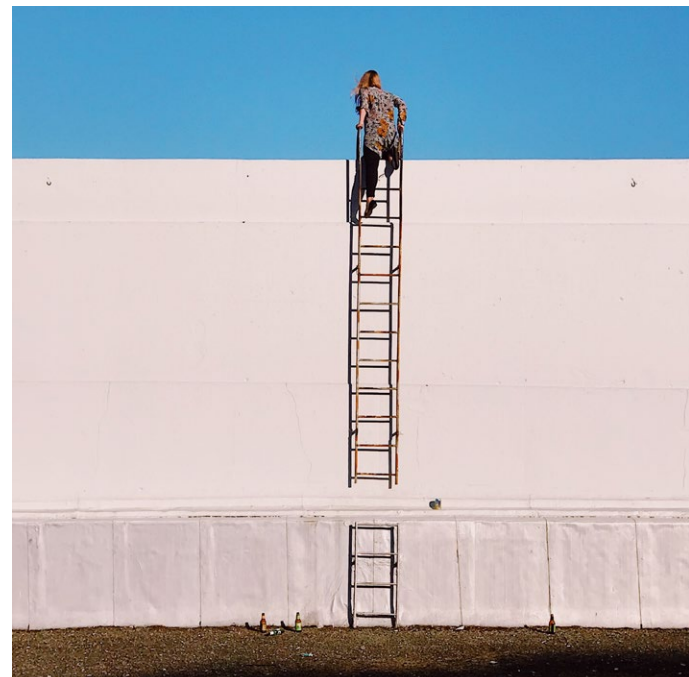
Beyond these direct attacks from online trolls and fringe groups, risktakers also have to deal with government interference. In some countries, legal frameworks have been changed to obstruct how social movements

not least to avoid the appearance of statistical representativeness or causality. Instead, the research findings have been captured by means of a summative write-up that features selected quotes from the interviews. Although the content of the quotes remains unchanged, light editing has been done for ease of reading. For more details on the research methodology, please refer to the [Appendix](#).

operate, thereby effectively “shrinking” the space in which civil society can act.¹ An NGO that chooses the “wrong” side of an issue can face suppression by the state and the public. Some risktakers say that fellow activists have even been arrested. Add to this the financial risks that many interviewees have taken, using their personal funds to found and advance social or environmental initiatives.

Given these risks it should be mentioned that all interviews were conducted under the condition of anonymity and confidentiality. All interviewees were asked for their consent to participate and to have their names and organizations mentioned in this report.

1. For more information, see Pornschlegel, S. (2020). [Countering Shrinking Spaces: Recommendations to Support EU Civil Society](#). Brussels: EPC.



Two Risktakers in Their Own Words



**Farah Abdi, author and activist,
Germany**

What type of social or environmental issues do you work on? What inspired you to get involved?

I work to advance the cause of minorities like refugees and the LGBTQ+ community. I came to Europe on a boat across the Mediterranean at the end of 2012. I was fleeing the fear of persecution because of my gender identity. I thought that I was finally going to be free to live my truth on a continent where human rights are upheld and bigotry is a thing of the past. I was very surprised to find out that racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination were very much alive and well. Also, right-wing political parties and groups were on the rise when I arrived ten years ago. They were using immigrants like me to scare the public into thinking that there was an invasion of Europe. I decided back then to make it my life mission to fight these injustices, and that is exactly what I have done and continue to do.

What lesson would you like to share with future activists?

My mother always used to tell me that the one thing to do when you are facing hardship and your belly is empty is to moisturize your face, comb your hair, iron your clothes and step out into the sun with your sense of humanity and dignity intact. This is a lesson I have carried with me to this day.



**Zamzam Ibrahim, Students Organising for
Sustainability UK, United Kingdom**

What type of social or environmental issues do you work on? What inspired you to get involved?

Over the past few years I have devoted much of my time and energy to fight for climate justice. I am the daughter of Somali refugees that fled a civil war for safety in Europe. In 2011, Somalia was hit by one of the worst droughts in decades. My family there, who were farmers, lost everything overnight. That was the moment my perspective on climate issues shifted and I learnt what intersectionality in our activism truly means. Since then my work has centered around the importance of climate education. I believe if we are going to build a world that is just and sustainable we need to start at the root of the problem.

What organizations or individuals have been most helpful in your work and why?

I co-founded Students Organising for Sustainability UK (SOS-UK), a student-led climate organization that empowers students to shape their future through the power of education. We need to rise to the challenges ahead, we need to stand ready to mobilize, organize, protest, march and strike for a better planet. We have to be ready to change the world and we remain unapologetic about that.

What lesson would you like to share with future activists?

The most important thing is to show up in any way you can, each and every time, bringing along your skills, your network and your passion. If you are not willing to be a part of the solution then you are by default a part of the problem. Just by showing up, you will inspire others to do the same and that is how movements are made.

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The risktakers in this report lead and support social movement organizations that seek to empower socially marginalized groups, promote resilient and open democracies, and counter human-caused climate change.

These organizations are dedicated to averting present and future risks in a wide range of social and environmental issue areas, ranging from the fight against disinformation to the promotion of civil rights for Romani people to climate protesting. Despite their diversity, many movements are united in their concern for political rights and civil liberties. They fight for the rights of specific groups of people such as migrants and refugees or the LGBTQ+ community and they take a stance by defending the rule of law and the democratic state itself, for example by fighting for freedom of speech or an independent judiciary. Those working in the field of climate action promote sustainable practices in key sectors such as agriculture and construction, while also raising awareness for a more just and inclusive transition to a low-carbon economy and society.

Each of the interviewed risktakers has a unique perspective that is informed by their special interest and their personal experiences in one or several issue areas. However, risktakers stress the importance of cross-disciplinary thinking and cooperation because most social issues cannot be tackled in isolation. For example, reducing greenhouse gas emissions cannot be done in a socially just manner if the needs of the most vulnerable groups in society are not considered upfront, since it is they who are likely to be hit hardest by potential price hikes for energy, transportation, food and consumer goods.

Dissecting the specifics of each and every issue area in all five countries studied would go beyond the scope of this report. Therefore, the research team sought to identify pan-European patterns and trends. To do so, **interviewees were asked to name the risks they believe are the most threatening to their society today and tomorrow. Three clearly came out on top: social polarization, racism and Russia's war in Ukraine. In addition, climate change was mentioned as an important catalyst that exacerbates those risks.**

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Social Polarization

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For most of the interviewed risktakers the strongest threat to sustaining and strengthening democracy in Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom is growing social polarization: European democracies are at risk because people are increasingly drifting apart, not just economically, but also in terms of what and who they believe.

The interviews reinforce findings in the broader research literature which show that social polarization is first and foremost rooted in the unequal distribution of income and wealth. Or, more precisely, in how unequal people think their societies are. As a result, countries in which the perceived gap between rich and poor is high also tend to be plagued by distrust, anti-immigrant sentiments and an affinity with political strongmen and other authoritarian figures. This connection is not automatic, though.²

Risktakers concur and stress that polarization can also be fueled by governments and elected officials themselves, as their actions or inactions influence how a society deals with “hot button” issues that elicit strong emotions in people. One such issue is changing demographics and the oftentimes resulting question of who belongs to a society and who does not.

Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom are all home to people of different beliefs, cultural backgrounds, sexual identities and lifestyles. Still, risktakers confirm that these and other groups of people have been repeatedly singled out by right-wing advocates and political campaigners. By portraying minority groups as dangerous “others,” instigators have sought to seed distrust and hatred, causing further division.

The impact of such populist rhetoric is particularly apparent in Poland. Since 2015, the country’s coalition government, led by the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS),



². Ginsburgh, V., Perelman, S., Pestieau, P. (2020). Populism and Social Polarization in European Democracies (Working Paper No. 8458). CESifo.

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has been pushing a divisive narrative against the country’s old liberal elites—including selected civil society organizations—accusing them of being anti-Polish and catering to foreign political and cultural interests, as risktakers in Poland confirm.³ Equipped with significant powers, PiS has repeatedly launched attacks against key democratic institutions, including the public media, the civil service and the courts. As a result, there have been notable human rights violations in the country, including against women, whose reproductive rights have been heavily curtailed by the Constitutional Tribunal after abortion was effectively outlawed in 2020. The following quote reflects the distress felt by many risktakers in Poland.

“We have been warning for a long time about such threats to democratic culture [coming from the politicians and government officials], but it is by no means a source of satisfaction that in a certain sense these warnings have materialized. [...] we want to break the conspiracy of silence around the problem of racist aggression or right-wing extremism in Poland.”

Rafał, Never Again Association, Poland

are most often targeted by divisive narratives and actions are migrants, and especially refugees. Although the countries have dealt with migration and refugees for decades, each large influx, risktakers say, makes the existing problems of a polarized general public worse, because right-wing instigators seek to capitalize on the pre-existing xenophobia in parts of society, as the following subsection illustrates.

Going forward, climate change may also contribute to further economic division and social polarization, as a number of risktakers emphasize, especially in regard to the question of who is to pay for Europe’s planned transition to a low-carbon economy. The current disagreements over gas imports, gas shortages and financial support for struggling households and businesses can be seen as a preview of polarizing debates to come, risktakers in the climate field say:

“Climate change is a social problem for people. The more we decarbonize, for example [...] the less affordable things get for many people. So, we have to give poor people money so they can afford climate change or adapt to climate change.”

Bettina, Parents for Future, Germany

Although, so far, the legal consequences of polarization have been most extreme in Poland, polarizing political tactics can be witnessed in all five countries, risktakers say. The people who

3. For more information, see Bill, S. (2022). Counter-Elite Populism and Civil Society in Poland: PiS’s Strategies of Elite Replacement. *East European Politics and Societies*, 36(1), 118–140.

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Discrimination and Racism

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The current influx of refugees from Ukraine is the most recent in a long line of mass movements to, from and on the European continent. In fact, for Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom, migration has been a reality for decades, even centuries.⁴ Despite this normalcy, discrimination and racism are still very common, even towards those who have spent their entire lives in the five countries, risktakers say.

"[I am talking about] people who don't have a voice in the public sphere, you don't see them. You don't hear them. It's like they're not part of this country. Although they have lived here for 20 years, 30 years, 40 years."

Prodromos, Onassis AIR, Greece

Research shows that discrimination is often structural, that is that it does not only result from individual biases and prejudices against migrants (which do exist), but also from a set of written and unwritten rules that enable or even encourage people to treat migrants and other minorities differently.⁵ An example from the risktaker interviews serves as a case in point: African nationals who were living in Ukraine and were forced to flee because of the war had a much harder time applying for refugee assistance. This was because the emergency systems in place had been designed for Ukrainian citizens, not for Nigerians, Kenyans and other non-Europeans who were also living in Ukraine.

"I have noticed that because of a refugee's different ethnicity or different background, people react so differently. An example would be this crisis compared to the Syrian one."

Yolanda, Polyplanity Productions, Greece

Apart from structural discrimination by institutions and professionals, many migrants also face racist comments from ordinary people, risktakers say. While acts of open racism and

violence were only mentioned by some, recent large-scale surveys suggest that harassment and anti-Muslim, anti-Romani and anti-Black racism are common all over Europe.⁶ Risktakers regard these acts as posing a risk for social cohesion and some fear that, going forward, racist attacks may increase on account of demographic change. All five societies are aging and in need of more migration, not least in order to sustain their workforce and taxpayer base. As a result, countries are expected to become even more diverse, including in terms of cultural and religious practices, some of which have been the target of racist attacks.

"Basically, as soon as you leave the mosque you could be spat at, threatened and have your hijab pulled off and so on [...] The same could happen after church but is less likely to. Which is why people of faith need to organize with others against injustice and not just stay inside the comforting walls of their institutions."

Neil, UK Welcomes Refugees, United Kingdom

A few risktakers also commented on how climate change and the resulting migration from areas that become unlivable may play a bigger role in the future, estimating that millions of people could potentially head north from Africa and southern Europe as temperatures steadily rise.

4. Bade, K. (2003). Migration in European History. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

5. Burns, T. R. (2008). Towards a Theory of Structural Discrimination: Cultural, Institutional and Interactional Mechanisms of the 'European Dilemma'. In G. Delanty, R. Wodak, P. Jones (eds.), Identity, Belonging and Migration (pp. 152–172). Liverpool University Press.

6. See, for example, FRA (2018). Being Black in the EU. Second EU Minorities and Discrimination Survey. FRA.

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War in Ukraine

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In November 2022, the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) reported that more than 12 million Ukrainian refugees had been recorded across Europe. The resulting expansion of and urgent need for emergency services, such as organizing food and shelter and relocating refugees, was a dominant theme among risktakers. Most choose to help in whatever capacity they can and several see the war as a harbinger of future risks:

“This is what Volodymyr Zelensky said in an interview, that ‘today they came for us, tomorrow they will come for you. And we are actually defending your independence.’ There is a lot of truth to this. You know, I live 20 kilometers from the airport in Jasionka, which is potentially the main target of a Russian attack on Poland.”

Kuba, Committee for the Defence of Democracy, Poland

“Right now, the war in Ukraine I mean, [...] it’s a war in Europe, it’s a war in our backyard. And it is a very very worrying and very alarming situation and we don’t know where it’s going to go.”

Marilli, Theatre Entropia, Greece

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the latter’s resistance has created new social needs and aggravated existing ones. When risktakers realized that governments were not intervening quickly enough, they faced a decision, namely whether to expand their missions to fill these new humanitarian needs or stick to their original mission.

Most have decided to fill the needs that governments were neglecting and are debating how they can become flexible enough to immediately provide funds and other resources to support their partners in Ukraine while at the same time welcoming and relocating refugees. Many cite previous network relationships and partnerships as critical to their rapid and effective response. Some stress the importance of regranteeing available funds to other risktakers working on the frontlines in Ukraine.

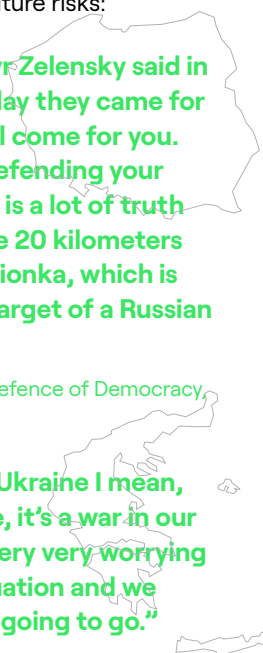
“We have a lot of partner organizations, friends there [in Ukraine]. What we did, we started from the first day to support them. So, the war started on the 24th [of February]; I called my colleagues and said, ‘We are lending money to you right now because we don’t know if Kyiv will be Ukrainian anymore.’ I don’t need to know what you will do [with the money], just do it.’ It’s about trust, right? Because I know they are doing something useful. Then, the next day or so, we started a donation campaign. We had never done that before, donations, yet in 10 days we got 1 million euros.”

Annegret, MitOst, Germany

Overall, many organizations have chosen to expand their mission to include disaster relief, have rapidly scaled up their activities in and outside of Ukraine and have come up with new ways to sustain delivery during warfare. For example, one risktaker working on dis-information in Central Europe decided to shift her organization’s focus to western Ukraine to help unaccompanied minors cross the border into Poland.

Sometimes, relief efforts go beyond traditional refugee aid. For instance, one risktaker said that most Ukrainian refugees in Poland are women and girls, and that they are entering a country that has restrictive reproductive policies that are strongly influenced by the Catholic Church. Hence, the risktaker’s organization has turned its attention and resources to providing these women and girls with basic information and help, even setting up a hotline for the victims of rape and sexual violence and those seeking an abortion. Another risktaker’s organization has expanded a summer school and an Easter camp originally organized for women and young people to include refugees from Ukraine who do not hold a Ukrainian passport. The organization is providing mentorship, digital literacy courses, robotics training and psychosocial support, for example.

The war in Ukraine has served to highlight many of the risks facing the five European societies today and tomorrow. The next section examines four key lessons that risktakers have learned while helping their organizations navigate this and other crises.





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Lessons Learned



Unleash the Power
of Networks



Tell a Compelling
Narrative



Fight False
Information



Diversify Funding

As risktakers organize protests, coordinate relief efforts and advocate for systemic change, they acquire knowledge and experience that can prove invaluable to others seeking to address social or environmental issues, including but not limited to NGOs, funders and corporations. As one risktaker puts it:

“I don’t think we will resolve [any social issue] as a whole. But we probably can be clever or knowledgeable enough to be able to say to others, ‘Here are some concrete tools you can put in your toolbox that will really help solve very specific and localized problems.’ And we will have credibility when we do it. Fortunately, there are a number of excellent people working toward these same goals and there’s a lot of information already out there, so no one needs to start from scratch or feel alone.”

Florian, Save the Children, Germany

This section sets out four lessons learned that risktakers have deemed the most valuable and worth sharing. In their experience, rapid and impactful action requires a strong network, a compelling narrative, more direct interaction with the media and elected officials, and a diverse pool of funders.

Unleash the Power of Networks



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The interviewed risktakers are embedded in the formal and informal structures of social movements and, often, also the communities they are advocating for. These transnational networks comprise NGOs, funders, researchers and a variety of other professionals and organizations. Risktakers use network partners to maximize the impact of a social movement by

- > promoting the achievements of network partners,
- > harnessing the skills, expertise and brand recognition of network partners,
- > targeting specific geographical areas in which partners are located and
- > increasing funding or decreasing costs for projects.

“We were super impressed by the Fridays for Future demonstrations. At the same time we felt guilty that kids are doing what adults should be doing, that is intervening and demanding massive changes in climate politics. So we decided to bring adults onto the streets, too. We started producing flyers, making videos and paying Facebook to post our videos, to get into the media. We did our own stuff, but with the intent to support the Fridays for Future movement.”

Torben, Together for Future, Germany

quickly. Risktakers who are part of more organized social movements rely on partners because of their expertise on a specific social or environmental issue or their knowledge of a particular region. **In countries where social movements and affiliated organizations are facing adversity, hostility or the infringement of their rights, transnational networks can help to maintain their basic capacity to act.⁷**

Relying on networks, however, creates its own challenges, risktakers say. The interviewees find themselves having to educate, direct and support individuals who are unfamiliar with their issue or operation, which takes time and resources. They add that this may give rise to potential legal roadblocks in countries where this type of relationship might pose a risk to an organization’s NGO status. These challenges are amplified when it comes to expanding the scope of a movement:

“When you talk about local activism, it is more emotionally driven. You’re talking about [members of] a community who are emotionally linked to something. [...] And when you mobilize and organize on a national scale, then you have to always find a common interest. And that’s very difficult to do.”

Zamzam, SOS-UK, United Kingdom

Despite these difficulties, for many risktakers the benefits of collaborating within a nimble network of partners outweigh the costs.

Most say they have built these networks from personal relationships over a number of years. Within such networks, each entity remains independent in terms of setting its own priorities and deciding what efforts to support. This implies that the trust that was previously established between the individuals has been maintained during the most stressful times. Risktakers from smaller organizations in particular require and appreciate the resources that network partners can (and do) provide

⁷ For more information, see Pornschlegel, S. (2020). *Countering Shrinking Spaces. Recommendations to Support EU Civil Society*. European Policy Centre.

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Tell a Compelling Narrative



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A consistent and compelling narrative is key to establishing and sustaining stakeholder awareness, which is necessary to advance a social movement.⁸ A narrative usually involves telling a compelling story about who you are and what you want to achieve. To be effective, messaging needs to be conveyed in a clear, accessible and creative manner, risktakers say. Many stress the importance of humanizing complex issues, for example by sharing the experience of individual community members:

“I was lucky enough to be the creative producer of *The Walk*, an international project from the UK. It was a huge puppet of an 8-year-old Syrian refugee girl named Amal that we walked from Gaza up to Manchester, crossing eleven countries. It raised awareness, especially for unaccompanied children.”

Yolanda, Polyplanity Productions, Greece

Artists can be risktakers, too, especially when they tackle subjects that spark controversial debate or a reactionary backlash, such as in regard to reproductive rights and migration.⁹ While some of the interviewed risktakers look back on careers in the field of arts or culture, the majority does not. Still, many say they would like to collaborate more with artists and creative minds to shed new light on pressing social and environmental issues and especially, the established narratives surrounding them.

Artistic and cultural elements in video, music, live performances, books and essays, paintings and drawings have the power to confront audiences with new perspectives and possibilities, maybe even solutions. Yet, the arts are not constrained by the conventional rules of political activism and communication.

The arts can confuse audiences just as much as

they can issue a warning or give hope in times of crisis.

Despite or precisely because the arts and culture follow their own rules and logic, many risktakers see great potential in future collaborations. The hope is that new narratives can be created together with artists and creative minds that can break through the noise of social media and the 24-hour news cycle and then shared with new groups of people. However, risktakers are also aware that audiences reached through artistic programming do not automatically correspond to their desired target audiences. Future collaborations would therefore require a conscious effort to reach out to new audiences, some risktakers say, both online and offline.

“I think the arts and culture are huge and that’s when I talk about scaling, that’s the thing that would really excite me. [...] but I think you have to make sure that you are not just in the cultural spaces where liberals are. You have got to be in the spaces of the movable middle, whatever those may be.”

Caroline, International Planned Parenthood, Poland

8. For experience gained in the climate field, see Bolsen, T., Shapiro, M. (2017). [Strategic Framing and Persuasive Messaging to Influence Climate Change Perceptions and Decisions](#). Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science.

9. For more information, see Freemuse (2021). [The State of Artistic Freedom](#). Freemuse.

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Fight False Information



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How members of the public come to understand a social issue and react to a crisis depends largely on their interpretation of the information they receive. This is where the media and elected officials have most influence. Politicians can and do disseminate inaccurate information, either by mistake (misinformation) or by design (disinformation). When the media accepts it—again, either by mistake or by design—the spread of information becomes a cascade of inaccuracies that creates a misinformed general public, which makes it harder or even impossible to push for social change.

That is why risktakers and social movements are well-advised to take a three-pronged approach to fighting misinformation and disinformation:

First, the interviewed risktakers suggest building strong relationships with influential mass media outlets and media personalities in order to actively participate in the discursive framing of a crisis at the outset. Risktakers from all five countries say that the mainstream

media could do a better job of giving the public more accurate information about pressing social and environmental issues and about the role that NGOs and other social movement organizations play in addressing them. For example, several Italian risktakers mention that many Italians believe their government should be doing the work that social movements are doing. When members of the public hear about an NGO finding jobs for refugees, they tend to be confused and skeptical, thus making it harder for these organizations to advance their cause.

“[People] would ask me, ‘Who let you do that?’ – ‘Who let me do what? You mean, pick up this trash off the ground?’ It’s something I constantly learn about Italian culture and the deep-seated sense of ‘it’s not my job.’ They think—or claim to think—that either some authority should have to instruct citizens to take action or that some authority should take that action itself. But oftentimes, it doesn’t.”

Rebecca, Retake Roma, Italy





Second, several risktakers mention Instagram, Twitter and other social media platforms as impactful and cost-effective channels for combating fake news and other types of inaccurate information. However, given the relative openness and democratic nature of these tools, social media have also been described as particularly prone to disinformation and even hate speech, which several risktakers have themselves experienced. These experiences notwithstanding, most still see great potential when it comes to using social media, especially for targeting disinformation in communities and age groups that can hardly be reached through traditional media:

“But I think [social media] is one of the best modes of mobilizing global movements that I have seen. It is how young people, specifically Gen Z, have mass mobilized and they’ve done that via layman’s terms, campaigning, simplifying language and simplifying actions. It’s such an accessible way and it can be translated into multiple languages. It can be used by multiple people; it can be understood by somebody in 140 characters. And I think that’s really incredible.”

Zamzam, SOS-UK, United Kingdom

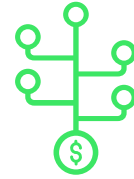
Third, risktakers suggest exploring more direct routes of informing elected officials and other government staff. In some countries, NGOs can work alongside the government in a positive, informative way by lending credibility and subject-matter expertise, for example by sitting on advisory bodies and expert committees. However, this collaborative approach to advocacy and policymaking does not exist everywhere. Where it does not, some risktakers have found it helpful to work with EU institutions, not only to counter disinformation, but other pressing issues as well:

“We have to step across our border and approach the European Union, because we cannot do anything inside our country on the domestic front. [...] We have started to travel to Brussels very frequently to convince the European Commission to start infringement proceedings [against the Polish government] before the European Court of Justice because we were anticipating another step of so-called reform [in Poland]—the government calls these steps a ‘reform of the judiciary’ something that is, in fact, the deforming of the judiciary.”

Michał, Free Courts Initiative, Poland

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Diversify Funding



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Risktakers from all five countries agree that project development, including experimentation, and project implementation require unrestricted, unattached and quickly awarded funding. Resources are also needed for movement growth, such as staff recruitment and retention. To improve their organizations' financial bottom line and flexibility, risktakers see an urgent need for public and philanthropic funders to amend their funding rules. But they also stress the need to look for new sources of funding.

Whenever public or philanthropic funds are available, the ways they can be used are often too restrictive, risktakers say. The interviewees criticize the fact that many governments and foundations do not seem to understand that sometimes expenses need to be diverted or increased quickly and substantially. The Covid-19 pandemic is a case in point: During the earlier stages of the pandemic when social movement organizations needed immediate funds to provide vaccinations and healthcare to staff and volunteers, risktakers were often

unable to receive quick help from these funders. Instead, they found partners within the movement that were able to provide the much-needed resources. Smaller organizations in particular require and appreciate the resources that larger partners can (and sometimes do) provide quickly. However, while such diversification efforts are described as fruitful, the necessary regranting rules still lag behind.

"We, as an organization, oftentimes redistribute funds. The budgets that we get, we hand part of them out to smaller organizations around us. Individuals who we work with. So, making it easier to regrant funds [would be important]. I mean, it's all about growing the ecosystem. And often, civil society organizations have a better overview of emerging talent, matching people in the field and can support them better in the early stages than big foundations and funders can. [...] Also, rapid response grants of 5,000 euros can move a lot. Even 500 euros for some organizations can do a lot if it comes with very little red tape and it comes very fast and without a lot of strings attached. I think these small grants are underestimated in terms of the impact they can have for non-profit organizations because they can give you the flexibility you need at certain points in time when you just don't have the time to read a grant proposal."

Julia, SuperrrrLab, Germany

Apart from advocating for new funding rules and leveraging network connections, a few interviewees shared other creative ideas to increase funding. One organization is producing and selling hoodies, t-shirts, bags and other merchandise with political messaging. The sales have helped increase both the organization's visibility and the amount of donations it has received.



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“Our organization has never wanted to make use of external funds. So as not to be co-opted. This is the reason why we became almost a brand, you know, in order to gain some money to support our activities, for example to cover travel costs. So we started with a little franchising. We produced, for example, t-shirts, because of course, in order to sustain our activities, we needed some money.”

Edith, Italiani Senza Cittadinanza, Italy

Besides money, the voices and activities of people who follow and support the work of risktakers are and will continue to be just as critical. Some interviewees say they want their supporters to boldly raise awareness of when they or other risktakers are being attacked. While some feel good about those who back them, others have voiced concerns.

“I’m very worried about young people. I don’t see any progress. I don’t see any. I’m very sad about what they say. There is no creativity, no motivation, no sparkle for the different, the change, the movement of change. Something has stolen the vision from young people and they have become passive. Young people should be the present of humanity not the future. We don’t have any support in what we do, but as dreamers we are still trying. Even getting one person to change is for us a great win.”

Aris, United Societies of Balkans, Greece

This risktaker’s experience serves as an example of the many challenges that risktakers face when growing and diversifying a movement’s supporters. But there also appears to be lots of untapped potential: Recent large-scale surveys show that European youth and young adults are more concerned than older generations about social justice issues, climate change and other future risks. According to this research, many are willing to do more to support social and environmental causes.¹⁰

While both perspectives can be true in their own right, their contrasting take on Europe’s next generations are indicative of the many knowledge gaps that currently exist, especially when it comes to how young people re-imagine the future, the kind of society they want to live in and what they are willing to do to make this future a reality.

To help address these gaps, the Allianz Foundation has developed a large-scale international study that will take a deeper dive into these realities and ideas. By surveying more than 10,000 young adults, the study sets out to map, compare and contrast how young Europeans in Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom envision a future society and what they are willing to do—including the risks they are willing to take to fight for that future.

The study findings will be published in the autumn of 2023. More information is available at allianzfoundation.org/study.



¹⁰. Kantar (2021). [European Youth in 2021. European Union.](#)

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This report offers readers a deeper understanding of what it takes to impact a social or environmental issue through creative, strategic and risktaking approaches to social movement building and it identifies future risks to these efforts and European societies at large.

The findings reinforce those that are widely accepted in the social movement literature, which stress the importance of connecting and supporting those risktaking individuals and organizations that are spearheading social change. The interviewees repeatedly emphasized how, during the ongoing climate, health and security crises, it is the transnational networks within and between social movements that have allowed for a quicker and more efficient response. Without these connections it would have been very difficult to provide financial, legal and other support to partner organizations, especially to those in countries where civil society has come under attack from the government and other groups.

Such actionable partnerships are not only beneficial when it comes to delivering much-needed services to vulnerable populations. **Going forward, connections between risk-takers across national borders, disciplines and professions could serve as the foundation for a stronger, more impactful and more European civil society.**

This is intended to inspire funders to re-examine who they are supporting, how and why. The findings of this Allianz Foundation Risktaker Pulse indicate that if we can lessen the burden of the activities that almost all of the 59 risktakers in this report now engage in individually—such as building and maintaining transnational networks, crafting and spreading a creative and compelling change narrative, finding and gaining access to less restricted and longer-term funding—we can give these dedicated individuals and their organizations a substantial boost to succeed in a dynamic and ever-changing world.

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Research Methods

The research team at INFLUENCEISG, led by Derrick Feldmann, studied the viewpoints, approaches and strategies of selected social movement leaders (i.e., risktakers) in three steps: An environmental scan (comprising social movement identification and interviewee recruitment), followed by field interviews and a qualitative data analysis.

The goal of this cross-country research was to detect common challenges across the five European countries studied and to identify shared lessons learned that transcend national borders.

Step 1: Environmental Scan

The environmental scan revealed an initial list of relevant European social movement organizations. This was based on the methodological approach taken by the Movement of Movements project at Oxford University's Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship.

Using the movement selection criteria outlined in the first section of the report ("The Risktakers"), researchers took an inductive approach to identifying social movement organizations and conducted Boolean web searches using related keywords and phrases linked to those criteria. Based on the information provided on the organizations' official websites, social media pages (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and alternative sources (news articles, reports), researchers identified 244 social movement organizations, categorized these into three priority groups (high, medium, low priority) for potential interviews and then submitted the list to the Allianz Foundation for review and selection for outreach. The final selection was based on two criteria:

First, each organization had to fulfill at least one of the four social movement tenets (see report section "The Risktakers"). Second, their organizational mission had to be normatively aligned with the progressive United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), Goal 13 (Climate Action) or Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

As a result, the final sample was limited to organizations whose politics, values and goals can be described as left-leaning or center-left. Far-right social movement organizations were excluded from the research.¹¹ A total of 162 individuals serving in the final sample of organizations were contacted and asked for permission to be interviewed. Of these, 86 agreed, 16 declined and 59 were then interviewed between March 1 and June 30, 2022. To be considered, the 59 interviewees had to play a leading role in their organization, either as a founder, a leading member or as someone who has used the arts and culture to raise awareness for a social or environmental issue or to drive participation in the movement.

Step 2: Field Interviews

Fifty-nine individuals participated in semi-structured interviews conducted by researchers that lasted approximately 60 minutes and were audio-recorded using a video conferencing tool. One interviewee who was unable to participate in a live, recorded interview was sent an interview guide by email so as to be able to submit a written response. After each interview, researchers used the recordings only to transcribe the responses of those participants who provided written consent to do so (which 58 out of 59 did).

11.

At the time of writing this report, the Allianz Foundation was conducting a large-scale international study that also includes a sizable number of respondents with right-wing political views. For more information on the study, see allianzfoundation.org/study.

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All these data were collected, processed and stored in accordance with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation.

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Appendix**Step 3: Data Analysis**

Data analysis began once the interviews had been initiated and continued until the last interview was completed and transcribed. Researchers performed line-by-line readings of the transcripts and engaged in open coding, which was done in multiple cycles. This approach permitted the generation of codes and categories that were compared, contrasted, refined, reduced and eliminated as consistent patterns in the data were recognized and connected. After the initial round of coding, members of the research team convened to compare and confirm uniform coding and categorization.

In total, this research involved more than 75 hours of interviews. The individuals who participated were generous with their time, authentic in terms of their comments and eager to find out how others like them approach similar challenges.

Country Selection

Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom were chosen based on their individual exposure to salient risks affecting people, society and the planet. The countries were selected in a three-step process. First, salient risks were operationalized using the following statistical indicators:

- > People at Risk: Percentage of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET; data source: Eurostat)
- > Society at Risk: Global freedom score (data source: Freedom House)
- > Planet at Risk: Ratio between energy-related greenhouse gas emissions and gross domestic energy consumption (data source: Eurostat)

Second, all EU member states, EU candidate countries as well as Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom were ranked based on the above indicators. Finally, five countries were chosen based on their individual ranking and their geographical location. Instead of exclusively focusing on those countries with the highest risk exposure, the goal was to select a balanced sample that reflects the diverse realities across Europe (Table 1).

Table 1 Country selection

Source: [Eurostat 2021](#), [Freedom House 2021](#)

	People at Risk (% NEET)	Society at Risk (Global Freedom Score)	Planet at Risk (CO ₂ ratio)
Germany	Low risk (5.7%)	Low risk (97)	High risk (87.2)
Greece	High risk (16.9%)	Medium risk (87)	Medium risk (74.9)
Italy	High risk (21.2%)	Low risk (90)	High risk (82.2)
Poland	Medium risk (12.0%)	Medium risk (82)	High risk (85.9)
United Kingdom	Medium risk (11.3%)	Low risk (93)	High risk (81.8)
EU27	Medium risk (11.8%)	N/A	High risk (82.8)

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Separate Analysis: Social and Environmental Issue Areas

The word cloud at the beginning of the first section of this report (“The Risktakers”) documents the concrete issue areas in which the interviewed risktakers and their social movement organizations pursue social and environmental change. The data are based on a separate analysis, which was conducted by Allianz Foundation in three steps: First, the official websites and social media pages of the social movement organizations that the interviewed risktakers are affiliated with were searched for mission statements. Second, all mission statements were extracted, translated into English, if necessary, and searched for concrete issue areas, such as LGBTQ+ rights and the fight against disinformation. Third, all the issue areas were subjected to inductive coding. After two rounds of coding and category development and modification, the final categories were clustered, interpreted and synthesized into the issue areas set out in the aforementioned word cloud. To be included, an issue area had to be mentioned at least twice.

As this research has shown, crises can prompt organizations to rapidly shift or expand their mission to meet an immediate need. Thus, in the context of Europe’s ongoing climate, health, energy and security crises, the word cloud should be understood as a rough approximation of the plethora of social and environmental issues that the risktakers in this report help address.

Table 2 Project timeline

Month (2022)	Deliverable
January	Kick-off
February	Research design and instruments
March	Interviews with risktakers
April	Interviews with risktakers, initial data analysis
May	Interviews with risktakers, initial data analysis
June	Interviews with risktakers, initial data analysis
July	Final data analysis
August	Draft report
September	Editorial feedback, revised report
October	Final report (October 31), report design
November	Report published

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