



# Deep Adaptation in CEE

Synthesis Paper



September 2024



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## **Synthesis Paper**

# Acknowledgements

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Date of publication: September 2024

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## Introduction

Since its introduction in 2018, Deep Adaptation has been considered a controversial and thought-provoking contribution to climate science. Deep Adaptation is a framework for understanding the future of Earth's biome in a world beset by climate change. Its central claim is that climate change is a process which has become unavoidable and that its most harmful effects will lead to widespread societal collapse unless humanity engages in severe adaptation measures which will fundamentally change the structure of society as we know it.

It is important to understand the role that adaptation has in our strategy to reduce the harms of the incoming climate changes. Whether we invest more in addressing the worst effects of climate change through mitigation or through adaptation depends, in part, on the likelihood we attribute to the inevitability of a climate catastrophe. Additionally, we need to gauge the intensity of the adaptation efforts necessary in order to protect the most vulnerable from harm. While it might be more convenient to imagine that slow change will be sufficient, Deep Adaptation argues that a fundamental societal restructuring will be necessary in order to create climate resilient communities. The contention is that climate change should be seen holistically, not just from an environmental angle but also from a political, economic, social, and, crucially, humane perspective. Lastly, Deep Adaptation is worth exploring because of its emphasis on community engagement and climate anxiety alleviation. Individual and collective consultation in climate change activism or policymaking is crucial in order to reach efficient and inclusive solutions.

Therefore, the aim of this study is twofold. First, it aims to unpack the concept of Deep Adaptation, track its evolution and contextualise it in the wider environmental movement. Second, it analyses how the Deep Adaptation Framework can help inform adaptation efforts in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The paper concludes with a set of recommendations drawn from the framework that should inform the way we approach climate change risks in the future.



## What is Deep Adaptation?

### Foundations

Deep Adaptation was first formulated by Professor Jem Bendell. It proposes to introduce a framework to navigate the impending climate crisis both at the individual and societal level. The first building block of Deep Adaptation is the idea that societal collapse as a result of climate change is inevitable. Given the advanced stage of adverse changes to the Earth's climate (e.g. Arctic warming, sea level rise, heightened frequency of extreme weather events, the acidification of the ocean), and the relatively low public awareness of these phenomena, it appears inevitable that any actions taken in order to prevent climate change are coming too late.

As a result, human societies will have to deal with increased climate-related displacement and migration of large masses of people, multiple failed harvests and shortages of life-sustaining resources like water and electricity. Therefore, the paper argues, it is necessary to concentrate on restructuring society in order to adapt to changes in our environment. Building resilience should become a main priority, not only physical (e.g. community-building, policy activism) but also mental resilience against climate change anxiety and hopelessness (also conceptualised as inner versus outer adaptation).

### Influence

The arguments of Deep Adaptation have resonated with communities of environmentalists across the globe. The Deep Adaptation Forum is a community created in order to bring together individuals and organisations which subscribe to the principles of Deep Adaptation. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) specifically,



national Facebook groups have been established.<sup>1</sup> They are used in order to share resources, organise meetings and coordinate policy action.

In addition, Deep Adaptation has informed the activism of some of the most prolific climate change movements. Notably, Deep Adaptation principles have influenced the founders of Extinction Rebellion, the UK-founded movement which advocates the use of civil disobedience in order to pressure governments to act in response to the climate crisis (Read 2019).

Public opinion also follows the conclusions of the Deep Adaptation Framework. According to the Eurobarometer survey, fielded in 2023 (see Figure 1), 70% of Central and Eastern Europeans agree that the costs of the green transition are lower than the harms resulting from climate change and that, therefore, green policies are profitable. Additionally, 60% agree that adaptation to climate change is beneficial for EU citizens. Of course, this cannot be said to constitute agreement with all aspects of Deep Adaptation. However, it represents a solid starting point for environmental activism in line with Deep Adaptation principles.

## Criticism

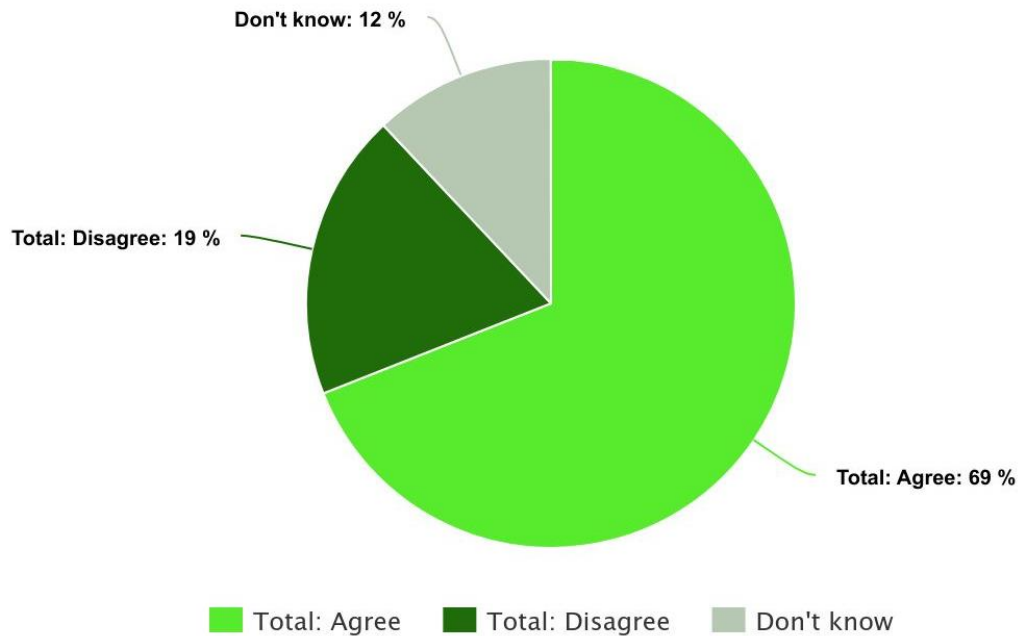
### Scientific Robustness

The theory has received pushback from the academic community. Some have questioned the scientific claims made in the original paper, either by disputing the scientific claims outright or by challenging whether they constitute tipping-points (Nicholas *et al.* 2020). The concerns around the robustness of the theory are compounded by the fact that the original paper was self-published after being rejected by a peer-reviewed journal (Bromwich 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Groups can be currently found in Berlin, Germany (Deep Adaptation | Wie leben im Angesicht des Klimakollaps?) — over 320 members — and Hungary (Deep Adaptation Hungary - Készülj & Alkalmazkodj) — over 22 800 members.





meta-chart.com

**Figure 1.** ‘The costs of the damages due to climate change are much higher than the costs of the investments needed for a green transition.’ *Source:* [Eurobarometer 2023](#). Calculations for CEE specific countries<sup>2</sup> done by the author.

In response, Bendell issued some corrections to the initial set-up of his argumentation (Bendell 2020). However, he also stresses that these do not undermine the central claim of the paper, i.e. that the worst effects of climate change cannot be avoided. Additionally, Ahmed (2018) argues that it is not even necessary to believe that societal collapse will come directly from environmental sources. They outline the precarity of current essential resource production and distributions systems, as well as highlight some of their vulnerabilities to climate change related risks. There is scientific consensus that extreme events like failed crops will occur with much higher frequency. It then appears plausible that even a small number of these catastrophes would be enough to cause

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<sup>2</sup> CEE countries included: Bulgaria, Czechia, East Germany, Estonia, Croatia, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.



massive societal geographical redistribution, especially if strong adaptation efforts are not implemented. Therefore, even if the original iteration of the theory leaves something to be desired from the perspective of scientific robustness, its conclusions seem to be reliable given the precarity of our current societal construction.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectional climate change scholars have highlighted the need to decolonise Deep Adaptation. Concerns around climate justice and the effect of the climate crisis on indigenous or marginalised communities are not once mentioned during Bendell's 2018 introductory paper. Moreover, as Bromwich (2020) notes, the study appears unaware that the catastrophic collapse that it describes is already happening to populations in the Global South. In response, groups like The Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective have written about the ways in which indigenous knowledge might help shape efforts to reorganise society. This shift mirrors wider conversations within environmental sciences, which are increasingly seeking to platform non-white voices which have been historically marginalised in conversations about responding to the climate crisis (Johnson *et al.* 2022).



## Implications for Adaptation in Central and Eastern Europe

Having outlined the core contribution of Deep Adaptation, the second half of the study will focus on drawing four essential lessons, based on Bendell's publication and further reconstruction in response to criticism, which can help inform environmental activism going forward.

### a) **We need to be quick(er) and more radical in order to adapt to the worst effects of the climate crisis**

Europe has seen some of the most ambitious green transition initiatives in the world. The European Green Deal is a far-reaching set of goals and tools which aims to create a financial, legal and policy framework in order to prepare the region for the impending climate crisis. Member States are now legally mandated to reduce their emissions by 55% until 2030 and become climate-neutral by 2050 (European Commission 2020). As part of this, the EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change provides a coordinated framework through which Member States are committed to 'boosting adaptive capacity, strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability to climate change.' (European Commission 2021).

However, Deep Adaptation scholars argue that these changes are too slow and not sufficiently radical in order to fully prepare European populations for the impending climate crisis. The first point of contention is the proposed timeline. Decades-long transitions are less demanding on current powerholders and their financial interests. However, given the rapid pace of climate deterioration and the increasing occurrence of extreme weather events, it is not a case of whether the climate catastrophe will materialise, but when. In this context, slow and steady change seems out of pace with the reality of our situation. Additionally, other regions are starting to pick up the pace at least in terms of mitigation strategies, showcasing conservative timeframes for adaptation might be unnecessary. For example, China has hit its goal of 1200 GW coming from clean energy sources in 2024, 6 years earlier from their 2030 target (Howe 2024).



The second issue is compliance. The EU is a very powerful supranational authority, but it is ultimately subservient to the wills of the individual Member States. The European Green Deal is groundbreaking in this respect, because it holds Member States legally responsible for achieving the 2030 and 2050 targets. However, what this means in practice is the threat of fines which, while inconvenient, do not represent a real deterrent when considering the upfront costs of the European Green Deal policies. This is readily apparent when considering other spheres of EU influence like the European Monetary Union, where national governments frequently run higher deficits compared to what they have committed to.

Additionally, Member States' response is complicated due to domestic opposition to climate adaptation. For example, the radical far-right political groups gained a large number of seats in the 2024 European Parliament Election, for which they ran a campaign which contained large amounts of rhetoric critical of the European Green Deal. Given the above-documented widespread support of adaptation to climate change, it seems that voters agree that adapting to climate change is necessary in theory, but are unwilling to commit to large short-term costs in order to achieve this. Here, Deep Adaptation might provide a framework to contextualise these costs as worthwhile by highlighting how damaging a future without adaptation might be.

#### **b) We need to take a holistic approach to climate change adaptation**

One of the core tenets of Deep Adaptation is the belief that the climate crisis will soon infringe on all aspects of day-to-day life, from the way we source food to where we find employment. As such, it predicts that we will have to soon reconcile with something which has always been true: that one cannot fully separate humanity's interaction with its environment from all other human activity. What we do to the Earth, we do because of the way we have built systems of power and because of the manner in which we distribute resources.

Therefore, it seems intuitive that, in order to construct a complete image of climate change, one needs to adopt multiple perspectives of analysis. Environmentally speaking, it is necessary to continue to study the most efficient adaptation methods to minimise harm done to humans and animal ecosystems. This combines the expertise



of biologists, engineers, chemists and representatives from a variety of other scientific disciplines. In addition, one needs to consider the systems which need to be engaged to implement the measures we decide are best.

Politically, as described under item 1, politicians and other relevant decision-makers need to be persuaded that campaigning on a deep adaptation agenda would not be detrimental to their careers — it might even be beneficial. This could be done through opinion surveys showing that the public is supportive of adaptation, or through attempts to highlight the long-term cost-saving effects of the policies.

Economically, the environmental movement needs to collaborate with the private sector. This is because of the need to minimise harms arising from the restructuring of society in order to adapt to the impending climate crisis. Collaborating with the private sector ensures that the short-term harms of restructuring systems of distribution of essential resources can be minimised.

Socially, Deep Adaptation argues that we need to reconsider how we distribute life-sustaining resources, such as water or electricity. Currently, these systems are becoming increasingly removed from public accountability and privatised. When societal collapse takes place, it is necessary to rethink how we can ensure that everyone gets access to the resources they need regardless of their financial or social capital in order to minimise harm.

Ethically, ensuring the protection of communities that have already suffered the brunt of climate harms should be a top priority. If we ignore the requirements for adaptation to take place in an efficient and equitable manner, then our climate movements are doomed to fail.

Moreover, local context should inform our strategy to increase resilience. For example, Central and Eastern Europe advocacy needs to account for the widespread post-soviet institutional inefficiencies, as well as for the relatively higher degree of political capture and political apathy or distrust (Kostelka 2016).

In addition, all these different fields inform the way we imagine society should be constructed after the collapse. Here, the disciplines of “collapsology” (referenced in the second iteration of the original Bendell paper) and “utopian studies” can become helpful.



The former describes the way in which society will be ended by climate catastrophes, while the latter provides a framework to conceptualise what we should build in its stead.

**c) We need to build a broad and inclusive coalition to push for adaptation**

In any movement, the perspectives of groups which are more powerful will be better represented. A higher level of financial power means those members will have more time and resources to dedicate to the cause. In addition, having more societal capital means that their voices will be amplified, their perspectives will be challenged less frequently, and their agenda-setting power will be relatively bigger. Therefore, any movement which wants to become more inclusive needs to take active steps to platform the voices of those who have been previously marginalised.

As signalled above, climate justice concerns towards non-white communities are increasingly pressing in environmental movements all across the globe. Taking a look at the CEE region, the European Environmental Bureau has reported that Europe's Roma communities are disproportionately suffering from a lack of access to basic services like running water or sanitation (Heidegger and Wiese 2020). Governments in the region have engaged in a troubling pattern of forced evictions and relocations of Roma communities to areas with many environmental hazards. Afterwards, the communities are blamed by state officials for creating the pollution they have been forcefully exposed to by deliberate government action. In this way, politicians skirt the duty they have to eradicate pollution they themselves have created in their cities.

The story of Pata Rât in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, exemplifies this phenomenon. A series of evictions saw the Roma community relocated from economically valuable land in the centre of the city to a landfill on its outskirts. The people now living in Pata Rât, according to a 2023 report by Civil Rights Defenders, live in an area overrun with pollution, trash and chemical waste dumped in the landfill by nearby factories. This has had a measurable effect on the population's health and wellbeing. According to a report by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC 2012), the community more than doubled their reported health problems two years after the evictions took place. This is worsened by the lack of easy access to hospitals, schools and community centres, which worsens life outcomes and makes political organising additionally difficult. The local



administration of Cluj-Napoca was tasked with cleaning up the area even before the evictions took place but, 14 years later, little progress has been made.

This story represents a mere snapshot of how marginalised groups are treated across the region. Figure 2, for instance, shows a CEE snapshot from The Global Atlas of Environmental Justice, which aims to provide an interactive overview of all environmental campaigns which have detrimental effects on local communities.

One other group of people who struggle to get their concerns represented in environmental adaptation planning is young people. Young people and their concerns are underrepresented in politics (both at the national and EU levels), while youth campaigners lack funds and a geographically concentrated community to advocate for. This is problematic, especially if one considers that the youth is the one who will bear the brunt of the worst effects of the climate collapse.

In response to this, youth engagement organisations have been set up with the explicit goal of advocating for protections for young populations against harms brought about by the climate crisis. For example, Mind Changers is a European project funded by the Development Educations and Awareness Raising (DEAR) programme which attempts to heighten youth engagement with environmental concerns, as well as lobby local authorities to include the concerns of young populations into adaptation legislation. As a result of their consultation sessions, they have published proposals to include the youth in climate change activism, with suggestions including the creation of youth councils at the municipal level, strengthening laws which protect young people in employment and advocacy, and the empowerment of youth groups.





**Figure 2.** Distinct types of socio-environmental conflicts in CEE. *Source: Global Atlas of Environmental Justice (ejatlas.org).*

#### d) We need to address climate anxiety at the individual and communal level

Deep adaptation, especially in its more recent iterations, takes the time to highlight that adaptation is not just a physical process (Bendell and Read 2021). The Deep Adaptation Forum website differentiates between ‘outer adaptation’ (i.e. strategies of harm reduction, advocacy, community building) and ‘inner adaptation’ (i.e. mentally and spiritually navigating the prospect of an imminent climate catastrophe). In doing so, it



highlights the need to address the psychological implications of societal collapse, an aspect which is frequently marginalised in conversations around improving resilience. More often than not, adaptation agendas focus on infrastructure construction and community engagement and tend to ignore the spiritual needs of individuals.

As is well documented in the literature, anxiety as a result of increasingly prevalent adverse weather events and climate predictions is on the rise (Clayton 2020). This is worsened by exposure to evidence that climate change will lead to an imminent societal collapse. Given this, critics of deep adaptation warn that an ‘alarmist’ rhetoric might be counterproductive to adaptation efforts because it could cause more harm than good for the movement and for individuals. However, both the original Bendell 2018 paper and further iterations provide competent responses to this valid concern.

First, it is argued that ignoring evidence of the inevitability of the climate catastrophe is not likely to be efficient at lowering climate anxiety. Living in denial is unsustainable, especially given that the suspension of disbelief will become less and less tenable as time passes while the observable extreme effects of climate change will be inescapable, even for currently sheltered audiences.

Second, denying the truth about the climate crisis does not provide room for strategies to come to terms with societal collapse. Instead of ignoring available evidence and hoping this resolves the problem, Deep Adaptation scholars advocate for directly addressing the spiritual and mental implications of the crisis. Practical approaches to lowering climate anxiety include practising mindfulness, building community with other environmental activists and connecting with nature. The Deep Adaptation Forum organises, supports or platforms many discussion groups, workshops and grief circles which aim to help people deal with their adverse mental health caused by climate change.

In the future, it would be beneficial to see governments and supranational bodies like the EU form plans and use their resources to tackle climate anxiety. This should not preclude individual and community-level action, but rather complement it. For example, programs and workshops could be delivered with the help of Ministries of Education, directly targeting young people, who are a risk group for climate anxiety.



## Conclusion

It is undeniable that the impending climate crisis is a serious matter. However, the degree of future harm and the corresponding necessary societal change are contentious. Deep Adaptation provides a framework to conceptualise and prepare for the worst harms of the climate catastrophe. It starts by acknowledging the very likely collapse of our current societal structures as a consequence of climate change and moves on to propose tools and solutions in order to minimise harm as a result of this crisis.

This study has outlined the history and constituent parts of Deep Adaptation, as well as applied the framework to the needs of the climate advocacy effort in Central and Eastern Europe. The lessons of the study are summarised below.

### Lessons for CEE

1. Frame adaptation is an urgent and necessary investment to avoid much bigger costs down the line that will inevitably come about due to climate collapse. While current goals are promising, if we fail to accelerate and reduce transition timeframes and to keep stakeholders accountable for their promises, we will not be prepared for the impending climate crisis.
2. Adopt a multi-disciplinary approach that takes into account environmental, political, economic, social and ethical aspects in order to address climate adaptation needs.
3. Include previously marginalised communities in activism efforts, particularly highlighting the needs of non-white communities and young people.
4. Provide guidance and psychological resources in order to tackle climate anxiety, while lobbying governmental agencies to address the mental consequences of the climate crisis.



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