

International Conference: The Evolving Climate and Energy Landscape in Greece

May 25-26, 2026

John S. Latsis Public Benefit Foundation

Summary of key topics, themes, and takeaways

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Conference Day 1 – May 25

Welcome Session: Introduction

To open the event, Director of Athens Columbia Global Center **Stefanos Gandolfo**, Minister of Environment and Energy of Hellenic Republic **Stavros Papastravrou**, Columbia Climate School Dean **Alexis Abramson**, and Director of University of Western Macedonia **Theodoros Theodoulidis** welcomed the audience to the conference and addressed the importance of partnership in **addressing energy and climate challenges**. Each emphasized that energy is both an economic opportunity and a strategic imperative for national security and social stability.

Using Greece's ongoing energy transition in the Western Macedonia region as a case study, speakers explored how collaboration between **academia, policymakers, and industry can support energy security and just economic development**, while simultaneously progressing towards climate goals. The discussion emphasized the importance of place-based learning, interdisciplinary research, innovation, and international cooperation in preparing the next generation of climate leaders.

The Conference Introduction highlighted that local challenges and their solutions serve as platforms for global learning and innovation.

“Meaningful climate progress depends on sustained collaboration across all domains, including academia, government, industry, society, finance...” – Alexis Abramson

“Western Macedonia used to be the center of lignite; now it will be the center of knowledge.” – Stavros Papastravrou on building an AI datacenter in Western Macedonia

Session 1: From Global Sustainability Goals to Regional Energy Decisions - Translating the EU Green Deal into Sustainable Development

Panelists:

1. **Dr. Phoebe Koundouri:** Professor, Athens University of Economics and Business; Co-Chair, UN SDSN Global Climate Hub; Founder, AE4RIA
2. **Nikos Tsafos:** Deputy Minister of Environment and Energy, Hellenic Republic
3. **Dionysia-Theodora Avgerinopoulou:** Prime Minister's Special Envoy for the Oceans; Columbia SIPA alumna
4. **Alexandra Mavrogonatou:** Head of Directorate of Strategic Planning and Coordination of Funds, Just Transition Development Special Authority

Moderator: Alexis Abramson, Dean, Columbia Climate School

Key Takeaways:

The **EU Green Deal and the UN Sustainable Development Goals** can be translated into actionable national and regional pathways, with Greece's lignite phase-out and Western Macedonia's transition serving as the central case study. Panelists agreed that **decarbonization** must be approached as an **integrated system**, and progress depends as much on **stakeholder engagement and skills capacity** as on technology and capital. So far, only **15% of the transition's required workforce capacity** has been realized.

Minister Tsafos and Director Mavrogonatou emphasized that Greece faces 10-15 viable investment pathways, but funding decisions must balance between mature, emerging, and frontier technologies. Energy **storage** was identified as the single highest near-term priority.

Special Envoy Avgerinopoulou reframed the transition as a **challenge of coordination and political will rather than financing**. Greece has secured €800 million for ocean and climate activities, up to €2 billion in a new decarbonization fund, €1 billion through the Ocean Pact, and over €200 billion in the Space and Defense and Earth Observation envelope. The challenge is **coordinating these resources and mobilizing private capital alongside them**.

Dr. Koundouri closed the analytical thread by arguing that the data, science, and tools to design bankable transition portfolios already exist; it is the **institutional capacity to implementation** that needs solidification. Decarbonization cannot be optimized through energy policy alone; it requires integrated mathematical modeling that co-analyzes energy along with **other sectors**.

Cross-border infrastructure is reframing Greece's energy geography. The Helios Project connecting Greece to Egypt and other ongoing mainland-to-island grid upgrades position Greece as a corridor between African renewables and European demand. Grid investment has risen from roughly **€400 million to €1.4 billion per year**, addressing a decade of underinvestment even during the financial crisis. This demonstrates that energy security requires political commitment, diversification of regional economies, a realistic roadmap of bankable projects, and **meaningful engagement with affected communities**.

"What is important is not how fast lignite will be phased out, but how all of us are involved in this procedure and create new investments and projects to support communities in staying." – Alexandra Mavrogonatou

Session 2: Accelerating the Renewable Energy Transition

Panelists:

1. **Richard Hartman:** Chief Innovation Officer, U.S. Air Force Office of Energy Assurance (OEA), Air Force Civil Engineer Center
2. **Vassilis Antoniadis:** Managing Director and Senior Partner, Boston Consulting Group;
3. **Andreas Gondolfo:** Strategy & Analytics Manager, Pulse Clean Energy
4. **Vasilis Nikitas:** Economic Counsellor, EU Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN)

Moderator: **Greeshma Gadikota**, Lenfest Earth Institute Chair and Professor in the Department of Earth and Environmental Engineering; Director, MS in Climate, Columbia University

Key Takeaways:

This panel brought together perspectives from the U.S. defense establishment, European policy, management consulting, and clean-energy development to **examine the relationship between energy security and climate goals**. A central thread was the **transatlantic split in language and politics** — the U.S. avoiding "green" framing while pursuing resilience, Europe leaning into climate ambition as a security strategy. Panelists converged on the view that the difficult conflicts are long-term and structural: supply-chain dependence on China, the justness of an accelerated transition, and bottlenecks in grids, permitting, and skilled labor. **Reshoring and EU strategic autonomy (Critical Raw Materials Act, REPowerEU) were recurring themes.**

Notable debate emerged over whether the binding challenge is generation, transmission and storage, or demand-side electrification, with hydrogen and data-center-driven demand featuring prominently. Antoniadis and Nikitas emphasized transmission, storage, grid modernization, and digital optimization as the frontier; Gondolfo pushed back that generation remains at the core and that demand-side electrification, such as EVs and heat pumps, is the most ignored and slowest moving piece.

The discussion then turned to the AI-driven load surge straining grids, distorting regional electricity prices, and turning data centres into a political target. This drives interest in co-locating generation with demand, nuclear (SMRs/micro-reactors), and islanded/behind-the-meter solutions. Grounded in Greece's post-lignite transition in Western Macedonia, the discussion stressed that success will hinge on deployment, workforce, financing of bankable projects, and social fairness. The session closed on an optimistic, generation-spanning note urging the audience to lead the next phase.

"Energy security is also economic security." – Richard Hartman on evolving the U.S. policy framing beyond "energy security is national security"

"Renewable production requires one-sixth of the personnel of traditional lignite generation." – Vassilis Antoniadis on the human-capital implications of the transition

Session 3: The Future of Conventional Energy in a Net-Zero Economy

Panelists:

1. **Kostas Andriosopoulos:** Founding Executive Director, HELLENIQ ENERGY Center for Sustainability & Energy at Alba Graduate Business School
2. **Helena Athoussaki:** Chief Sustainability Officer, Motor Oil Group
3. **Louis “Tripp” Hornick III:** Principal, Quince Street Strategy
4. **Alexandros Lagakos:** Managing Director, Eastern European Region, Molgas
5. **Alexandra Papalexopoulou:** Executive Director, TITAN GROUP

Moderator: **Lefteris Topaloglou**, Associate Professor, Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Western Macedonia; Head of ENTRA Lab; Director, Institute of Energy Development & Transition to Post-Lignite Era

Key takeaways:

This panel examined the complex trade-offs facing conventional energy industries and **hard-to-abate sectors** as Europe pursues net-zero. Panelists agreed that regulatory instability, policy reversals, and the absence of honest public accounting of transition costs are the primary barriers to durable investment. Companies cannot commit capital when policy direction reverses every few years, and the true cost of the transition, estimated at **€1.2–1.5 trillion per year by 2050**, has not been honestly put before the public.

A recurring theme was **Europe’s risk of accelerating deindustrialization**: high carbon costs and uncertain policy signals are pushing hard to abate sector production offshore to jurisdictions with looser standards, paradoxically increasing global emissions while **eroding European competitiveness**.

Speakers emphasized that pragmatic interim solutions, such as bio-LNG, biofuels, energy efficiency gains, and supplementary cementitious materials, can deliver significant near-term reductions, while Carbon Capture and Storage, though promising, remains expensive and technically unproven at scale. The panel concluded that the path forward requires policy predictability above all else, combined with honest dialogue about costs, system-wide ecosystem alignment, and an innovation culture.

“The mistake that we’re making as a continent, as Europe, is that we are trying to force the user to go green instead of incentivizing the user to go greener.” – Alexandros Lagakos

“If we don’t have clarity with regards to the market, if we don’t have clarity with regards to the regulation, if there is no infrastructure, and at the same time you don’t have a bankable project, then you cannot have a stable business plan.” – Helena Athoussaki

Session 4: Policy Perspectives on the Energy Transition

Panelists:

1. **Theodora Antonakaki:** Director of Climate Change and Sustainability Centre (CCSC) at Bank of Greece
2. **Anne-Sophie Corbeau:** Global Research Scholar at the Center on Global Energy Policy (CGEP), Columbia University
3. **Panagiotis Grammelis:** Director of Research at CERTH/CPERI
4. **Nikos Mantzaris:** Co-founder of The Green Tank
5. **Natasha Martsekis:** EYDAP Board Member
6. **Stella Tsani:** Associate Professor at the University of Athens

Moderator: **Alexander Cooley**, Professor and Vice Provost at Barnard College of Columbia University

Key Takeaways:

This panel brought together experts to discuss the complex geopolitical, regulatory, and systemic challenges of navigating the global shift toward green energy. The discussion highlighted the geopolitical **trade-offs of moving from "petro-states" to "electro-states,"** emphasizing the European Union's precarious balancing act between **ambitious climate targets and a heavy dependence on energy and critical mineral imports.**

Panelists underscored that while the long-term economic and environmental costs of inaction far outweigh the immediate costs of transition, achieving a Just Energy Transition (JET) requires massive **grid modernization, investments in energy storage, and long-term policy stability.** Furthermore, speakers addressed the critical need for robust corporate climate governance, noting that European regulations like the CSRD are forcing a shift toward standardized, auditable ESG data to combat greenwashing and build stakeholder trust.

As the EU moves to electrification, they will become **increasingly dependent on China** for critical **minerals and battery, solar, and wind technology.** How dependent they become has the capability to wreak havoc on the global energy system. **EU countries must begin manufacturing at home or importing from trusted allies, not just China.**

Ultimately, the panel concluded that overcoming the transition's hurdles requires not only advanced technological portfolios but also a concerted effort to bridge gaps in **public sector education, workforce training, and corporate data collection.**

“If energy is life, climate is our home.” – Theodora Antonakaki

“The climate transition is most effective when it’s embedded in strong climate governance” — Nikos Martsekis

Conference Day 2 – May 26

Session 5: Entrepreneurship Driving New Energy Solutions

Panelists:

1. **Kostis Daniilidis:** Founder and CEO, Survey Digital Photovoltaics
2. **James Lyons:** Chief Technologist, Capricorn Investment Group
3. **Michael Rowley:** President, CEO, Director at Stillwater Critical Minerals Corp
4. **Anastasis Stamatis:** Co-founder & CEO, Dataphoria

Moderator: Panagiotis Karampinis: Managing Director of Endeavor Greece and Regional Managing Director, Europe

Key Takeaways:

The panel explored how entrepreneurship and innovation are shaping the future of the energy transition, bringing together perspectives from renewable energy, venture capital, critical minerals, and sustainability startups.

Speakers highlighted that while renewable energy deployment has advanced rapidly, the next challenge is managing energy systems through **storage, grid modernization, AI, and smart infrastructure.** The greater challenge is **integrating technologies into reliable, affordable, and resilient energy systems.** AI represents both an energy challenge and an energy solution.

The discussion also emphasized the **critical role of entrepreneurs** in developing flexible, scalable solutions that large organizations often struggle to implement quickly. Looking ahead, panelists expressed optimism about the **opportunities** created by the energy transition, while noting the importance of critical minerals, energy storage, impact investing, and technological innovation in building a resilient and sustainable energy future.

"My wish for the next 10 years will be to have an energy industry that can be managed... We need vertically integrated companies able to manage energy. AI will be a part of it, for sure, but we also need to focus on the critical infrastructure." – Kostis Daniilidi

"It's a great time of transition, and that brings a lot of opportunity." – Michael Rowley

Session 6: Society, Regions, and Economic Transformation

Panelists:

1. **Eleftherios Ioannidis:** Former Mayor of Kozani, Western Macedonia, Greece
2. **Yianna Chormova:** Governor, Greek Public Employment Service (DYPA)
3. **Despoina Garani:** CEO, Metavasi S.A.

Moderator: **Georgios Christoforidis**, Professor of Electrical Power Systems, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Western Macedonia; Vice Rector for Research and Innovation

Key Takeaways:

The session focused on the social and economic dimensions of the energy transition in Western Macedonia, highlighting tensions between policy goals and lived experiences on the ground. Speakers examined the challenges of ensuring that the energy transition in Western Macedonia is both economically and socially just.

While speakers highlighted major investments in workforce development, clean energy, and new industries, local leadership raised concerns that many **residents remain disconnected from the transition process and have yet to see tangible benefits**. Key economic and social indicators in the region continue to lag behind national averages. Workforce development and reskilling efforts are expanding, particularly in green and digital skills, but concerns remain about whether training programs are meeting local needs and keeping pace with labor market demands. Panelists stressed the importance of **tailoring transition policies to local contexts**, strengthening local businesses, and ensuring vulnerable groups are included in decision-making and economic opportunities.

The discussion underscored the importance of **procedural justice, community participation, and locally tailored policies** in building **trust** and creating durable economic opportunities. Ultimately, the panel emphasized that successful transitions depend not only on investment and infrastructure, but also on **public engagement and social inclusion**.

"Citizens in Western Macedonia do not feel that they are part of the transition. "People whose lives are affected must feel ownership of the process." – Eleftherios Ioannidis

"Policy cannot be horizontal and one size fits all." – Yianna Chormova

Session 7: Young Researchers Session

At the final session, the students participating in the Columbia University - University of Western Macedonia (UoWM) Summer School presented field-based research and reflections from the prior week in Kozani, putting their on-the-ground experience in direct conversation with some of Europe's leading voices on climate and energy. The projects are listed below:

Reimagining Energy System Integration

- Alaty Almejhed (MS in Climate, Columbia University)
- Alyssa Plascencia (MS in Climate, Columbia University)
- Maria-Alexia Georgiadou (BSc Electrical Engineering, UoWM)
- Rafail Natsalis (BSc Electrical Engineering, UoWM)

Repurposing Coal Mines for Flexible Renewable Energy

- Celina Xuping Gong (MS in Climate, Columbia University)
- Sadie Eidson (MS in Climate, Columbia University)
- Panagiotis Panagiotidis (BSc, University of Western Macedonia)
- Chrysostomos Apostolos (BSc, University of Western Macedonia)

Integration of Circular Economy Initiatives within Western Macedonia's Renewable Energy System

- Alissa Krochenski (MS in Climate, Columbia University)
- Mary Salvador (MS in Climate, Columbia University)
- Nestor Kontos (Meng in Chemical Engineering, UoWM)
- Chrysoula Stefanidou (Meng in Chemical Engineering, UoWM)

Hydrogen Technologies for Industrial Efficiency

- Dheeraj Babariya (MS in Climate, Columbia University)
- Tracy Obirika (MS in Climate, Columbia University)
- Alexanadra Peirounaki (Meng in Chemical Engineering, UoWM)
- Igli Zousi (Meng in Chemical Engineering, UoWM)

Energy System Integration for Resilience

- Milind Kudapa (MS in Climate, Columbia University)
- Xiao Ma (MS in Climate, Columbia University)
- Andriana Migadi (Meng in Chemical Engineering, UoWM)
- Alexandros Savvidis (Meng in Chemical Engineering, UoWM)

The session concluded with presentations from two Greek researchers from the University of Western Macedonia and a PhD student from the University of Athens, focused respectively on governance frameworks for a just energy transition, superconductivity for BESS, and international climate policies.

The conference concluded with closing remarks from Professors Greeshma Gadikota and Lefteris Topaloglou.