

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE EVENT SUMMARY

MINERALS FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT BOOSTING THE REsourceEU PLAN

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1 SUMMARY

[CIRAN](#) (**Critical RAw materials extraction in enviroNmentally protected areas**) is an EU-funded Horizon Europe project focused on developing policies that balance the need for critical raw materials with the protection of sensitive ecosystems. The project aims to reconcile these societal goals where they may diverge, by exploring sustainable extraction policies and leveraging social contract models to inform local communities, industry, and policymakers. Since inception in January 2023, CIRAN has brought together research, industry and policy-making partners from thirteen Member States, further ensuring diverse and complementary knowledge- and experience-sharing with dynamic external expert groups and a community of practice that includes local authorities, environmental managers and industry.

Following a successful European Parliament session in October 2025, CIRAN convened stakeholders and thought leaders at the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels on 12 November 2025 for a session on "Minerals for Strategic Autonomy and Regional Development: Boosting the REsourceEU Plan". This event, co-hosted by the EESC's Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI), brought together representatives from EU institutions, environmental NGOs, industry, regional government, and international organisations to address the persistent challenge of stakeholder engagement in minerals policy.

2 EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE SESSION

Context

The Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) works towards the EU's energy transition and climate-neutrality goals but also addresses rising regional and economic security concerns. It establishes ambitious targets of 10% domestic extraction of CRM, 40% domestic processing and 25% of domestic recycling by 2030, expedites permitting for strategic projects and enhances supply disruption monitoring, whilst upholding rigorous social and environmental standards. The recently announced REsourceEU plan further reinforces this agenda through strategic stockpiles, coordinated procurement, expanded circular economy measures, accelerated resource partnerships, and increased investments in domestic processing capacity—responding to heightened supply vulnerabilities highlighted by China's export restrictions on rare earths and battery materials.

Rebuilding European minerals capacity however faces a fundamental challenge: finding the right balance between European public interest priorities of access to minerals and societal concerns about environmental impacts and community interests. This tension is exacerbated by rising Euroscepticism, institutional distrust, concerns about equitable distribution of benefits and burdens, and a questioning of current socio-economic development trajectories. Traditional approaches relying predominantly on technical assessments, expert consensus, and promises of economic development have proven markedly insufficient in addressing these legitimate societal concerns.

Recent experience reveals a deeper problem: **discussion around mining and mineral extraction has become so politically sensitive and polarised** that many stakeholders—including MEPs from S&D, Renew Europe, and Greens/EFA groups, mayors from mining-affected regions, and environmental NGOs—decline to participate even in forums explicitly designed to find common ground between environmental protection and EU competitiveness. This reluctance to engage in dialogue poses a significant risk to European cohesion and resilience, as resource-rich regions (often located in less-developed areas) may feel they carry a concentrated environmental and social burden of serving broader EU strategic objectives.

These tensions pose a significant risk to European cohesion and resilience, as resource-rich regions (often located in undeveloped areas) may feel they carry a concentrated environmental and social burden of serving broader EU strategic objectives. Without meaningful engagement towards reliable employment opportunities, benefit-sharing mechanisms and integration with regional development frameworks, implementation of the CRMA could inadvertently deepen territorial disparities and undermine the solidarity that underpins the European project.

Compounding these challenges is the striking spatial reality revealed by CIRAN's research: **more than 85% of known EU critical raw material deposits are located either below environmentally protected areas or within 5 km proximity**—creating an apparent conflict between resource security and nature conservation objectives that conventional extractive models may not adequately resolve.

CIRAN was designed to not only address these challenges, by developing, testing and validating processes to arrive at systemic policy-making, sound decision-making and sustainable consensus-building, but also spotlight and realise the **opportunity of responsible mineral operations in Europe** on the basis of a system-oriented assessment and the co-creation of knowledge with and by communities located in or nearby environmentally protected areas.

CIRAN

CIRAN is structured around seven interconnected work packages complementing each other towards a shared goal of efficient policy making (WP6). [Notable findings](#), which were briefly presented on 12 November, include:

Good Practice Case Studies

[Extractive activity projects](#) were assessed, from exploration to post closure, all located in or proximity to or interaction with protected sites across the EU: all demonstrate **good practices in spatial, mineral and environmental governance, attention to whole project lifecycle management including end of mine or project life provision, and continuous stakeholder engagement and communication**. Although specific to a time and place, these cases offer invaluable insights to enhance and maintain project acceptance over time. This resulted *inter alia* in [comprehensive guidelines](#) for conducting rehabilitation activities on mine sites located in environmentally protected or sensitive natural areas, whether on an ongoing, progressive basis during operations or at End of Life of the mine.

Nexus of Societal Vulnerabilities

Most Member States assessed for [fitness-for-purpose of regulatory frameworks](#) apply a balanced approach to reconciling mining and environmental protection, with some moderately favouring environmental protection. As the CRMA and other European frameworks, such as the [Nature Restoration Regulation](#), are implemented, it is expected that both requirements will increase. **Faster and more effective balanced decision-making is and will be needed, currently hindered by governance frameworks, resource identification, spatial planning and designations, administrative procedures, stakeholder engagement and social acceptability and spatial data, reporting and expertise**. This analysis will be contextualised by the CIRAN Scenarios for 2035, four narratives of possible futures for the EU, integrating drivers, trends, uncertainties, CRM outlooks and actions needed to materialise. This will foster forward- and critical-thinking, allowing Europeans to reflect on short- and long-term implications of daily practices and the relevance of CRMs to our society.

Performance Appraisals

The mid- to long-term environmental and societal impacts of extractive activities in protected areas were reviewed, looking at real-case performance gaps to compare what was expected from technologies, processes, and strategies at the design and permitting stage with what communities and ecosystems experience at the implementation stage. The dimensions considered in the

assessment included nature conservation goals and constraints, mining processes and technologies used, and the given geological settings (type and characteristics of CRM deposits). Analysis of technical feasibility revealed that deep mining operations employing advanced automation, underground processing, and precise drilling techniques can significantly reduce surface impacts, though effectiveness remains highly site-specific. This resulted in a structured [three-tier decision-making protocol](#) using the DPSIR (Drivers-Pressures-State-Impact-Response) framework to balance competing societal needs, beginning with policy-level evaluation of critical raw material needs, proceeding through technical and economic feasibility assessment, and concluding with site-specific environmental impact evaluation.

The protocol establishes that **extraction beneath protected areas may be justified where demonstrable critical raw material need exists, geological conditions permit minimal surface impact, appropriate technologies can be implemented, environmental values can be adequately protected, and stakeholder concerns can be effectively addressed.**

Inclusion and Knowledge Co-creation

[Public debate narratives](#) in five Member States about the exploration and extraction of CRMs in Europe in general, and particularly in environmentally protected areas, were studied and tested with focus groups and in public meetings. **Narratives are often divided along two main cleavage lines: security of supply**, mostly held by politicians and businesses arguing that Europe needs to increase its own production of critical raw materials in order to reduce its reliance on imports from China and other non-EU partner countries; **and environmental protection**, from populations and environmentalists focusing on (adverse) impacts. Despite commonalities across Europe and amongst stakeholders, narratives are influenced by economic and energy development levels and social perception of climate change risk. Beyond the environmental aspects, a clear need emerged for early, genuine, and inclusive public participation in decision-making processes related to mining projects. Resulting from this analysis, guidelines for public engagement and dialogue are forthcoming.

Towards Efficient Policymaking

Engagement on mineral priorities must shift from polarised debates to nuanced discussions aiming to balance economic, environmental and societal objectives. As the EU strengthens its efforts to secure critical resources to achieve strategic policy objectives, building public trust through transparent governance, inclusive active engagement and sustainable mining practices are essential. Stakeholder co-creation processes – bringing together industry (with innovative business models and technologies), governments (with robust governance, permitting and grievance mechanisms backed by a sufficient number of experts and administrators), and communities (with co-created visions for the future) – offer the most promising path towards harmonising EU resource security with environmental stewardship and social equity. A promising approach lies in the development and implementation of novel social contracts, such as **Community Development Agreements (CDAs) – a tool that can help bridge the gap between EU or national strategic priorities and regional or community needs while strengthening European cohesion and resilience**. CDAs are binding agreements between local authorities, mining companies, and communities, requiring no change to national legal frameworks whilst adapting their application to each area, including in terms of environmental protection and socio-economic development.

Panel Discussion: Creating Conditions for Dialogue

The panel discussion, moderated by **Malika Moussaid**, brought together diverse perspectives from international organisations, environmental NGOs, EU institutions, and regional government. Two poll questions catalysed the debate:

1. Whether enabling the transition to clean energy and mobility requires significantly more CRM mining in Europe;
2. Whether public interest in EU autonomy should override local interests where 85% of CRM deposits lie in or near protected areas.

The discussion revealed fundamental differences in perspectives on mineral demand, the role of sufficiency and circular economy, and the balance between strategic priorities and local democratic rights.

Environmental Perspective: Demand Reduction and Democratic Rights

Lindsey Wuisan from Friends of the Earth Europe was the only panellist to openly disagree with the first poll statement, arguing that prevailing demand projections are rooted in a linear, growth-centred, extractivist model that overshoots planetary boundaries. She called for a paradigm shift towards sufficiency, demand reduction and systemic change (e.g. shifting from private car dependence to public transport). Furthermore, she warned against "overriding public interest" derogations circumventing EU environmental laws thus posing a risk for public health.

She stressed that meaningful public participation in Environmental Impact Assessments and decision-making requires realistic timeframes, full transparency and a genuine possibility to change or even stop projects, rather than treating consultation as a box-ticking exercise. She rejected the framing of "public interest vs local interest", arguing that protecting water quality and ecosystems in mining areas is itself a public interest.

International Perspective: Mining Regions and Social Licence

Bridget Donovan from the OECD brought a mining-regions perspective, drawing on the OECD Mining Regions and Cities Initiative. She underlined that in Europe, unlike in parts of Australia or Canada, mining projects are often located close to communities and protected areas, which amplifies social and ecological sensitivities.

In her experience, projects without strong local support and clear benefit-sharing mechanisms struggle to proceed or remain sustainable, making social licence to operate and legacy mine rehabilitation central challenges. She recognised that current projections indicate rising mineral demand for the energy transition, but stressed that the key question is how mining is done, not just how much, and how benefits and risks are shared locally.

EU Regional Policy Perspective: Territorial Dimension

Wolfgang Munch from DG REGIO highlighted the territorial dimension: mining, refining and recycling fundamentally reshape local economies and therefore require strategic tools similar to those of the Just Transition Fund—not to phase out, but to "phase in" mining in a strategic, participatory way.

He stressed that mining alone will not ensure resilience; Europe also needs technology, innovation, circularity and full value chains, as well as reforms to reduce bureaucratic delays in permitting that are often rooted in Member State implementation rather than EU law itself. He noted that large public investments in Europe still take over 20 years from idea to implementation, which is incompatible with the urgency of today's strategic challenges.

EESC Perspective: Standards and Geopolitical Reality

Konstantinos Diamantouros emphasised that Europe has very high environmental and social standards, but has outsourced "dirty" production. Europe then imports high-emission products, which is environmentally inconsistent. Increasing mining and industrial production within Europe under strict standards can actually contribute to global environmental goals.

He pointed out that CRMs are increasingly weaponised geopolitically; therefore Europe needs to be more realistic, strengthen its own production base and have a more honest, less idealised debate about trade-offs. Public interest and local interest are not opposites; the real issue is how mining is done and how local communities are brought on board.

Audience Contributions

Industry Perspective: Permitting Bottlenecks

An industrial minerals association representative argued that the main bottleneck is permitting, not finance: while the CRMA's 27-month benchmark is welcome, it excludes environmental impact assessments, which alone require several years of baseline monitoring and can be derailed by electoral cycles or policy shifts, leaving companies in limbo.

He asked for more agile and flexible permitting so that companies can valorise by-products (e.g. lithium from feldspar operations) via joint ventures or permit extensions, without being forced into illegality when the original permit did not foresee new valuable materials. He underlined that mining is a temporary land use and that with proper planning and polluter-pays instruments, post-mining sites can become new economic and environmental assets (e.g. Eden Project in Cornwall; biodiversity sites that attract nature enthusiasts).

Labour Perspective: Strategic Vulnerability

A trade union representative from the non-ferrous metals sector recalled how European firms deliberately moved out of mining and primary metals to "move up the value chain", whilst countries like China invested massively in extraction and refining. The green and digital transitions are now revealing how vulnerable this strategy has left Europe. He emphasised that mining in Europe will be needed for decades before recycling can supply significant shares from end-of-life products.

Geoscience Perspective: Public Investment Deficit

The EuroGeoSurveys representative pointed to new harmonised CRM maps for Europe and warned about chronic underinvestment in public geoscience, which is critical for future discoveries and informed decision-making. This infrastructure deficit undermines Europe's ability to make evidence-based decisions about resource development.

Technology Perspective: Recycling Realities

The European Lithium Institute representative cautioned against simplistic narratives about EV deployment and recycling, noting that EV volumes are expected to increase by an order of magnitude while battery recycling remains technically complex and may not rapidly reduce the need for primary mining. He questioned whether we need that many large vehicles to move one person and called for "European-compatible" solutions, such as durable, repairable EVs.

3 CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The EESC session represented a significant step forward from the earlier European Parliament event in achieving more diverse stakeholder participation. The session demonstrated that constructive, multi-stakeholder dialogue on critical raw materials is achievable when the right conditions are created. The presence of environmental NGOs, local government, EU institutions, industry, and international organisations in the same room—engaging substantively rather than rhetorically—represents significant progress in a policy area where such dialogue has become increasingly rare.

The discussions confirmed six key insights:

1. **Social acceptance is the binding constraint:** Technical solutions, geological potential, and even financing are secondary to the fundamental challenge of building and maintaining public trust. Without social licence, projects cannot proceed regardless of their strategic importance or economic viability.
2. **One-size-fits-all approaches fail:** The 85% spatial overlap between CRM deposits and protected areas means Europe cannot avoid difficult trade-offs. However, these trade-offs look different in Lapland than in Andalusia, and solutions must be adapted to local contexts while maintaining high environmental standards.
3. **Demand scenarios matter:** Fundamental disagreements exist about the scale of mining required for the energy transition. These disagreements reflect different visions of Europe's economic future—from sufficiency-based models to technology-intensive growth pathways. Policy must acknowledge these competing visions rather than assuming consensus.
4. **Legacy shapes future:** Past failures in mine rehabilitation, benefit-sharing, and community engagement create barriers to new projects. Addressing historical grievances and demonstrating improved practices are prerequisites for social licence.
5. **Democratic participation is non-negotiable:** In the European context, procedural rights and democratic participation are not obstacles to be overcome but values to be upheld. Successful projects will be those that embrace rather than circumvent these rights.
6. **Tools exist but require political will:** Community Development Agreements and similar social contracts offer practical frameworks for formalising commitments between operators, communities, and authorities. However, implementing them requires clear political signals, adequate resourcing, and genuine commitment to sharing power and benefits.

Priority Actions

Based on the discussions, several priority actions emerge:

For European institutions:

- Provide clear, consistent signals about mineral development priorities aligned with climate and industrial objectives while acknowledging the legitimacy of local concerns,
- Resource geological surveys and technical agencies to provide independent, trustworthy information,
- Support pilot projects testing Community Development Agreements in willing regions to generate evidence and build confidence,
- Integrate territorial and social dimensions into CRMA implementation frameworks.

For national governments:

- Empower and resource local authorities to manage complex stakeholder engagement processes,
- Address legacy issues from past mining operations that undermine trust,
- Clarify how "overriding public interest" provisions will be applied, ensuring democratic accountability.

For regional and local authorities:

- Engage early and transparently with communities on mineral development proposals,
- Build technical capacity to evaluate environmental and social impacts,
- Explore social contract models that formalise benefit-sharing and decision-making rights,
- Learn from regions with successful mining-community relationships.

For industry:

- Embrace transparency throughout project lifecycles,
- Invest in technologies and practices that minimise environmental impacts,
- Commit to meaningful benefit-sharing, local employment, and community engagement,
- Recognise that social licence requires sustained effort, not one-time consultation.

For civil society organisations:

- Engage constructively in policy dialogues while maintaining critical perspectives,
- Help communities build capacity to participate effectively in decision-making,
- Hold all actors accountable to commitments,
- Contribute technical expertise on environmental protection and social impacts.

For the research community:

- Develop evidence-based approaches to balancing extraction and conservation,
- Provide independent assessment of demand scenarios and technological alternatives,
- Document and share lessons from successful and unsuccessful projects,
- Support capacity-building for all stakeholders.

Moving Forward

The EESC session demonstrated that diverse stakeholders can engage constructively when conditions are right. The challenge now is to translate these insights and this tentative progress into sustained action.

This requires acknowledging the genuine tensions between different legitimate interests—resource security, environmental protection, democratic participation, economic development—rather than pretending they don't exist or can be easily resolved. It requires building the institutional capacity and political will to manage these tensions through inclusive processes rather than top-down decisions.

Most fundamentally, it requires recognising that the challenge of implementing the CRMA is not primarily technical or economic, but social and political. Europe's ability to secure its critical raw materials will depend not on geological exploration or mining technologies alone, but on its capacity to rebuild trust, create space for genuine dialogue, and develop governance models that balance strategic imperatives with democratic values and environmental protection.

The EESC session showed this is possible. The task ahead is making it systematic rather than exceptional.

4 APPENDICES

EESC Session Details

Date: 12 November 2025, 14:00-17:00h.

Venue: European Economic and Social Committee, Jacques Delors building, room JDE63
Rue Belliard/Belliardstraat 99-101, 1040 Brussels, Belgium

Audience: 26 invited guests, representing diverse groups of stakeholders.

Aim: Discuss how to balance environmental protection and local community rights and expectations with the urgent need to secure critical raw materials for the clean energy transition.

Background documents distributed: policy brief [Community Development Agreements: A legal framework for balancing critical raw materials development with local community interests](#).

Run of Session

14:15 – 14:30: Welcome and introduction (Konstantinos Diamantouros, Eberhard Falck).

14:30 – 15:00: Presentation of key findings, insights and suggested approaches to support the implementation of the CRMA and REsourceEU plan and foster EU strategic autonomy, by CIRAN partners Julian Hilton and Luis Rosendo.

15:00 – 15:45: Panel Discussion moderated by Malika Moussaid.

15:45 – 16:45: Q&A from the audience.

16:45 – 17:00 Thank you note and closure (Konstantinos Diamantouros, Eberhard Falck).

Participants Panel Discussion

Moderator:

- Malika Moussaid, CIRAN Consortium

Panellists:

- Bridget Donovan, OECD
- Konstantinos Diamantouros, EESC
- Lindsey Wuisan, Friends of the Earth Europe
- Wolfgang Munch, DG REGIO

Panel Discussion Outline

Step 1: Moderator's introduction	15:00 - 15:05
• Poll Question 1: To enable the transition towards clean energy and mobility we need to mine significantly more CRMs. Agree, Disagree, Unsure. • Poll Question 2: The public interest (extracting the CRM we need for Europe's autonomy) should override local interests. Agree, Disagree, Unsure.	
Step 2: Panel discussion: Novel Social Contracts for CRM Development	15:05 - 15:45
Part 1/2 Opening reactions to the poll questions Part 2/2 Key questions: debate • The policy brief highlights successful CDAs in Canada, Australia, and Mongolia, but European contexts differ significantly in terms of legal frameworks, population density, and environmental governance. What do you see as the primary obstacles to implementing CDAs in Europe? • With 85% of Europe's CRM deposits in or near protected areas, how can we ensure extraction serves the public good while maintaining environmental protection and democratic legitimacy?	
Step 3: Q&A from the audience	15:45 - 16:45
• Q&A from the audience (15:45-16:35). • Closing statements (16:35-16:45).	

Speaker Bios

Bridget Donovan is a Policy Analyst at the OECD's Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities, where she contributes to the Mining Regions and Cities Initiative. Her work focuses on strengthening wellbeing across economic, social, and environmental dimensions in mining regions, with particular attention to Indigenous communities and circular economy transitions. She has co-authored OECD publications on rural resilience and inclusive development, and regularly contributes to the OECD's COGITO platform, exploring place-based strategies for sustainable growth.

Konstantinos Diamantouros is Head of Brussels Office of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises and a Member of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). He contributes to the Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, the Single Market, Production and Consumption section and the Consultative Committee on Industrial Change. Mr. Diamantouros also chairs BusinessEurope's Economic and Financial Affairs Committee, where he shapes EU policy on macroeconomics, structural reform, and financial regulation, with a focus on competitiveness and investment.

Lindsey Wuisan Lindsey Wuisan is Resource Justice Campaigner at Friends of the Earth Europe, based in Brussels. She works on policy advocacy for sustainable resource governance and public participation of civil society and local communities impacted by mining. Lindsey is also the founder of Circular Economy Portugal and has over a decade of experience in EU and national policymaking, including roles at the Dutch Ministry of Environment and DG Environment. Her work bridges environmental protection, circular economy innovation and post-growth thinking.

Wolfgang Munch is Senior Expert in the Unit for Smart and Sustainable Growth at DG REGIO, European Commission. He leads work on regional innovation ecosystems, industrial transition, interregional cooperation as well as on environment and climate investments. Mr. Munch supports the implementation of cohesion policy instruments that foster competitiveness, sustainability and resilience across EU regions. His role includes strategic coordination of funding synergies and stakeholder engagement in regional development initiatives.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) works towards the EU's energy transition and climate-neutrality goals but also addresses rising regional and economic security concerns. It establishes ambitious targets of 10% domestic extraction of CRM and 40% domestic processing by 2030, expedites permitting for strategic projects and enhances supply disruption monitoring, whilst upholding rigorous social and environmental standards. The recently announced REsourceEU plan further reinforces this agenda through strategic stockpiles, coordinated procurement, expanded circular economy measures, accelerated resource partnerships, and increased investments in domestic processing capacity—responding to heightened supply vulnerabilities highlighted by China's export restrictions on rare earths and battery materials.

Rebuilding European minerals capacity, however, faces a fundamental challenge: finding the right balance between European public interest priorities of access to minerals and societal concerns about environmental impacts and community interests. This tension is exacerbated by rising Euroscepticism, institutional distrust, concerns about equitable distribution of benefits and burdens, and a questioning of current socio-economic development trajectories. Traditional approaches relying predominantly on technical assessments, expert consensus, and promises of economic development have proven markedly insufficient in addressing these legitimate societal concerns.

Recent experience reveals a deeper problem: discussion around mining and mineral extraction has become so politically sensitive and polarised that many stakeholders decline to participate even in forums explicitly designed to find common ground between environmental protection and EU competitiveness. This reluctance to engage in dialogue poses a significant risk to European cohesion and resilience, because without meaningful engagement towards reliable economic opportunities, implementation of the CRMA and REsourceEU plan could inadvertently deepen territorial disparities and undermine the solidarity that underpins the European project.

Compounding these challenges is the striking spatial reality revealed by CIRAN's research: more than 85% of known EU critical raw material deposits are located either below environmentally protected areas or within 4 km proximity—creating an apparent conflict between resource security and nature conservation objectives that conventional extractive models cannot adequately resolve.

A promising approach to address these challenges lies in the development and implementation of Community Development Agreements (CDAs)—an innovative tool that can help bridge the gap between EU or national strategic priorities and regional or community needs whilst strengthening European cohesion and resilience. CDAs are binding agreements between local government, mining companies, and communities, requiring no change to national legal frameworks. These agreements include dispute resolution mechanisms, non-compliance clauses, and bring decision-making to the local level, thereby helping to address the fundamental problem of lack of trust in government whilst accommodating local expectations, including environmental protection and socio-economic development. By creating conditions where participation feels safe, productive, and aligned with diverse stakeholders' interests, CDAs offer a pathway to rebuild the trust necessary for inclusive engagement in this contentious policy area. **For more information of CDAs [please see the policy brief available here](#).**