

Article

Sustainable Development and Democratic Resilience in the European Union

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Abstract

The European Union is increasingly confronted with a convergence of sustainability, democratic, and security-related challenges that affect the conditions for long-term transformation. While sustainable development and democratic resilience are often discussed separately, their interdependence has become more visible in the context of geopolitical instability, geoeconomic competition, hybrid threats, and growing societal polarization. This article examines the relationship between sustainable development and democratic resilience in the European Union and analyses how external pressures shape both agendas. The study employs a qualitative, concept-driven research design that combines the analysis of EU strategic and policy documents, a structured review of relevant scholarly literature, and triangulation with selected sustainability and governance indicators. The findings suggest that the implementation of sustainable development goals depends not only on regulatory and economic capacity, but also on social cohesion, public trust, and the resilience of democratic institutions, which together shape the legitimacy, continuity, and political feasibility of long-term transformative policies. At the same time, energy dependence, supply-chain vulnerabilities, technological dependencies, and information threats increasingly constrain the EU's sustainability agenda. In response, the article proposes the concept of Sustainable Democratic Security as an analytical framework linking sustainability governance, democratic resilience, and strategic-security capacity. The article contributes to the literature by conceptualising these dimensions as mutually conditioning components of a common governance framework and by outlining their implications for integrated EU policymaking under conditions of geopolitical and geoeconomic pressure.

Keywords: sustainable development; democratic resilience; European Union; sustainability governance; geopolitical risks; geoeconomics; security policy; strategic-security capacity



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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has entered the third decade of the 21st century under conditions of heightened systemic uncertainty shaped by the simultaneous intensification of environmental, socio-economic, geopolitical, and security-related pressures [1–5]. Climate change, energy insecurity, supply-chain disruptions, technological rivalry, and the return of large-scale armed conflict to Europe are transforming the context in which long-term public policy goals are pursued. At the same time, democratic systems across Europe face mounting pressure from disinformation, foreign interference, political polarization, and the

gradual erosion of institutional trust and checks and balances [6–9]. These developments suggest that sustainable development can no longer be treated solely as an environmental or socio-economic agenda, but must also be understood in relation to the stability and resilience of democratic governance.

These parallel developments challenge the traditional understanding of sustainable development as a predominantly environmental or socio-economic agenda. In the current European context, sustainability increasingly depends on political legitimacy, institutional effectiveness, and the capacity of democratic systems to maintain public trust under conditions of crisis and external pressure [10–12]. The implementation of long-term transformative policies aimed at climate neutrality, social cohesion, and economic adaptation therefore requires not only regulatory and financial capacity, but also resilient democratic institutions capable of sustaining support for complex and potentially contested reforms.

In this context, the EU presents itself as a major actor in the field of sustainable development through the implementation of Agenda 2030, the European Green Deal, and a broad regulatory framework aimed at environmental and social transformation [13]. At the same time, however, these ambitions are increasingly shaped by geopolitical instability, geoeconomic competition, and the growing salience of economic and security vulnerabilities. These developments have contributed to a reassessment of the EU's traditionally open economic model and to a stronger emphasis on strategic-security capacity, economic security, and the protection of democratic processes [14–18]. Initiatives focused on defending democracy, securing the information space, and protecting critical infrastructure indicate a broader shift toward integrating sustainability objectives with resilience- and security-oriented governance approaches [19–21].

Despite these developments, sustainable development and democratic resilience are still frequently examined as separate analytical and policy domains. Research on sustainability has mainly concentrated on environmental governance, policy integration, and innovation-driven transformation, whereas studies of democracy and security have focused more directly on institutional stability, democratic backsliding, and hybrid threats [22,23]. As a result, the literature still lacks a sufficiently integrated framework for examining how sustainability governance, democratic resilience, and external strategic pressures interact under conditions of geopolitical transformation. This gap is particularly important in the EU context, where long-term sustainability policies depend not only on economic and technological resources, but also on the quality of governance, institutional legitimacy, and the capacity of democratic systems to maintain social support for reform.

Accordingly, this article examines the relationship between sustainable development and democratic resilience in the EU in the context of current geopolitical, geoeconomic, and security-related developments. It proceeds from the assumption that sustainability and democratic resilience are interconnected and mutually conditioning dimensions of the European model of development. More specifically, the article argues that the effective implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) depends not only on regulatory and economic capacity, but also on institutional legitimacy, public trust, and social cohesion, while democratic resilience itself is shaped by the ability of political systems to address socio-economic insecurity, environmental pressures, and external strategic vulnerabilities.

On this basis, the article addresses three primary research questions:

1. How do current geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures affect the implementation of sustainable development in the EU?
2. How is democratic resilience linked to the legitimacy, continuity, and effectiveness of sustainable development policies?

3. How can sustainability governance, democratic resilience, and strategic-security considerations be integrated into a coherent analytical and public policy framework within the EU?

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, concept-driven research design that combines the analysis of EU strategic and policy documents, a structured review of relevant scholarly literature, and a comparative institutional perspective across selected dimensions of EU governance. These analytical components are complemented by triangulation with selected sustainability- and governance-related indicators used to contextualize the qualitative findings. By combining these sources, the article identifies the principal synergies, tensions, and trade-offs linking the EU's environmental, socio-economic, democratic, and security-related objectives.

The primary contribution of this article is the development of the concept of Sustainable Democratic Security (SDS) as an integrated analytical framework linking sustainability governance, democratic resilience, and strategic-security capacity. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate policy domains, the framework conceptualizes them as mutually conditioning components of long-term societal resilience in the EU. In doing so, the article extends existing debates on sustainable development by incorporating institutional and security-related conditions of policy implementation, while also contributing to the literature on democratic resilience by highlighting its socio-economic and environmental foundations.

The article is structured as follows. After the introduction, the next section reviews the relevant literature and develops the theoretical framework, with particular emphasis on the conceptual integration of sustainability governance, democratic resilience, and strategic-security considerations. The subsequent section explains the research design, source selection, and analytical procedure. This is followed by the presentation of the main findings, which are then discussed in relation to the broader theoretical debate and their implications for EU policymaking. The final section summarizes the main conclusions, outlines the contribution of the SDS framework, and identifies limitations and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Sustainability Governance and Sustainable Development Theory

Over the past decades, sustainable development has become a central framework for linking the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of public policy. Since the publication of the Brundtland Report, scholarly attention has gradually shifted from broad normative definitions toward the analysis of institutional arrangements and governance mechanisms through which long-term transformation may be pursued. As a result, questions of governance capacity, policy coordination, multi-level implementation, and the ability of public institutions to manage complex socio-ecological systems have moved to the centre of academic discussion.

A major contribution to this shift was made by Elinor Ostrom, who challenged centralized models of governing common-pool resources and emphasized the importance of polycentric governance. Her approach highlights the coexistence of multiple, overlapping, and interacting centres of decision-making operating across different territorial and institutional levels, from the local to the global [24]. Polycentric governance is particularly relevant to the EU, where sustainable development is pursued through a complex multi-level architecture that combines supranational regulation, national implementation, and regional and local adaptation [2]. In this perspective, effective sustainability governance depends not only on formal competences, but also on coordination capacity, institutional learning, and the ability to respond flexibly to changing external conditions.

At the global level, sustainability governance has been further developed within the framework of Earth System Governance, particularly in the work of Frank Biermann. This perspective emphasizes that environmental challenges transcend national borders and therefore require new forms of transnational coordination, political legitimacy, institutional accountability, and stakeholder inclusion [25]. From this viewpoint, sustainability is not merely a technical or managerial project, but a fundamentally political one, shaped by the quality of governance arrangements and by the inclusiveness of decision-making processes. This insight is especially relevant to the EU, where sustainability policies must operate across multiple institutional levels while preserving both democratic legitimacy and implementation capacity.

The operational dimension of this paradigm was significantly strengthened by the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which translated the broad principles of sustainable development into a more structured and measurable policy framework [26–28]. The SDGs not only provide indicators for monitoring progress, but also underscore the need for cross-sectoral coordination, policy coherence, and long-term institutional commitment. At the same time, the literature emphasizes that progress toward these goals cannot be reduced to technological innovation or regulatory design alone. Their implementation also depends on institutional quality, administrative capacity, social cohesion, and political stability [29–31]. This broader perspective is particularly important in the EU context, where the realization of sustainability goals requires both effective governance and durable democratic support.

Despite the growing interest in the institutional prerequisites of sustainable development, much of the literature still concentrates primarily on environmental and economic dimensions, while political resilience, democratic legitimacy, and security-related stability are often treated as background conditions rather than as constitutive factors of sustainability governance. This limitation becomes particularly visible under contemporary crisis conditions, in which the implementation of sustainable policies is directly shaped by the legitimacy, effectiveness, and resilience of public institutions. In the EU context, this suggests that sustainability governance cannot be fully understood without considering the democratic and strategic conditions under which long-term transformation is pursued.

2.2. *Democracy, Resilience, and Democratic Backsliding*

Parallel to the development of sustainability governance research, political science has increasingly focused on the quality of democracy, the resilience of democratic institutions, and the phenomenon of democratic backsliding. Whereas earlier theories of democratic consolidation often assumed the gradual stabilization and strengthening of democratic regimes, more recent research points to the erosion of democratic norms and institutional safeguards from within the system itself. This shift has redirected scholarly attention toward the conditions under which democracies are able to absorb shocks, preserve legitimacy, and maintain their core functions in periods of political, social, and external pressure.

Nancy Bermeo argues that contemporary forms of democratic decline rarely occur through abrupt ruptures such as military coups; instead, they more often unfold through incremental, formally legal, and institutionally embedded changes to the rules of the democratic process [22]. This pattern of “backsliding without coups” includes the weakening of judicial independence, restrictions on media pluralism, and the manipulation of electoral competition. In a similar vein, Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize that democracies often deteriorate when informal norms—such as mutual tolerance and forbearance—are progressively eroded, even if formal institutional structures remain in place [20]. From this perspective, democracy should be understood not as a fixed institutional condition, but as

a fragile and continuously reproduced order dependent on both formal safeguards and informal norms.

The concept of democratic resilience, developed in the broader literature on regime durability and democratic quality, refers to the capacity of democratic systems to absorb shocks, adapt to changing conditions, and preserve their core functions without abandoning the principles of pluralism, accountability, and the rule of law [32]. Political systems characterized by higher levels of institutional trust, administrative effectiveness, and social cohesion tend to be more resilient to polarization, disinformation, and external interference. These insights are highly relevant for sustainability research. The implementation of climate, social, and economic reforms requires long-term policy continuity, institutional credibility, and a sufficient degree of public support for potentially demanding transformations. From this perspective, democratic backsliding does not constitute a parallel problem external to sustainability governance, but a process that can directly weaken the capacity of states and institutions to pursue long-term transformative goals.

In addition to formal checks and balances and informal democratic norms, participatory channels and complaint mechanisms also shape democratic resilience. Accessible procedures for public consultation, petitioning and redress can help to surface grievances related to socio-economic inequalities or perceived policy failures at an early stage, thereby reducing the risk that dissatisfaction will be channelled primarily through anti system actors. In this perspective, the quality of participation and responsiveness complements institutional design as a key component of resilience against polarization, disinformation and democratic backsliding.

2.3. Geopolitics, Geoeconomics, and Economic Statecraft

The third stream of literature relevant to this research draws on international relations and political economy, particularly debates on geopolitics, geoeconomics, and economic statecraft. Globalization, long understood primarily as a source of interdependence, efficiency, and peace, is increasingly also interpreted as a source of vulnerability, asymmetrical dependence, and strategic coercion. This shift is especially significant for the EU, whose model of development has historically relied on openness, external economic interdependence, and rules-based cooperation.

The concept of geoeconomics, as developed by Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris, highlights the use of economic instruments—such as sanctions, export controls, investment restrictions, trade dependencies, or control over critical supply chains—to achieve geopolitical objectives [15]. In this perspective, economic policy becomes an increasingly important extension of strategic competition. A closely related contribution is the concept of “weaponized interdependence” formulated by Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, who show that actors controlling key nodes of global economic and technological networks can exploit this position to monitor, influence, or constrain others [16]. As a result, dependence on supply chains, energy flows, digital infrastructure, and strategic technologies becomes not only an economic issue, but also a matter of security and political vulnerability [33].

For the EU, this means that openness and economic integration—long regarded as pillars of prosperity and stability—may simultaneously generate forms of strategic vulnerability [34]. This is particularly evident in areas such as energy dependence, access to critical raw materials, digital infrastructure, and advanced technologies, where external dependencies can directly affect both policy autonomy and implementation capacity. Sustainable transformation therefore cannot be analysed independently of strategic autonomy, economic security, and the protection of democratic processes [4,35–39]. In the EU context, the external strategic environment is not merely a background condition, but an active factor shaping the feasibility, legitimacy, and resilience of long-term sustainability policies.

2.4. Integrative Conceptual Framework

A review of the existing literature reveals three major, yet still only partially connected, research streams: theories of sustainability governance, scholarship on democracy and democratic resilience, and analyses of geopolitical, geoeconomic, and strategic power. Although each of these strands offers important insights into the conditions of long-term societal stability, their analytical integration remains limited. As a result, the literature still lacks a sufficiently coherent framework for explaining how sustainability governance, democratic resilience, and external strategic pressures interact within a single model of societal transformation, particularly in the EU context.

This fragmentation constitutes a significant research gap because the three dimensions are not merely adjacent, but mutually conditioning. Sustainability without democratic legitimacy and institutional trust is politically fragile and difficult to sustain over time. Conversely, democracy without socio-economic stability, effective governance, and credible responses to environmental pressures becomes more vulnerable to polarization, populism, and external interference. At the same time, geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures can constrain both sustainability governance and democratic resilience by increasing strategic dependencies, limiting policy autonomy, and amplifying institutional stress. An adequate analytical framework must therefore capture not only the coexistence of these dimensions, but also the mechanisms through which they reinforce or weaken one another.

Based on this synthesis, the article proposes the concept of Sustainable Democratic Security (SDS) as an integrated analytical framework for examining the interaction between sustainability governance, democratic resilience, and strategic-security capacity in the EU. The framework is built on three mutually conditioning dimensions. The first dimension, sustainability governance, refers to the institutional and policy capacity to pursue long-term environmental, social, and economic transformation. The second dimension, democratic resilience, denotes the ability of democratic institutions and political communities to preserve legitimacy, participation, accountability, and public trust under conditions of stress and contestation. The third dimension, strategic-security capacity, captures the ability of the EU and its member states to anticipate, absorb, and respond to geopolitical, geoeconomic, technological, and hybrid threats that may constrain both policy autonomy and implementation capacity.

Analytically, SDS assumes that these three dimensions interact through reinforcing as well as constraining mechanisms. Effective sustainability governance may strengthen democratic legitimacy by improving social cohesion, public goods provision, and institutional credibility. Democratic resilience, in turn, increases the continuity and legitimacy of long-term sustainability policies, particularly when reforms are politically demanding or distributively contested. At the same time, insufficient strategic-security capacity can undermine both dimensions by exposing institutions and policy processes to external coercion, supply disruptions, information manipulation, or technological dependence. Conversely, excessive securitization may also create tensions with democratic openness and participation. The SDS framework therefore does not assume automatic harmony between its components, but emphasizes the coexistence of synergies, trade-offs, and institutional tensions.

More specifically, the interaction between the three SDS dimensions can be interpreted through several recurrent mechanisms identified in the analysed material. First, socio-economic inclusion and the provision of public goods contribute to higher levels of institutional trust, which in turn support the legitimacy and continuity of long-term sustainability policies. Second, external economic and technological dependencies may translate into strategic vulnerabilities that constrain policy autonomy and complicate the implementation of sustainability objectives. Third, democratic resilience affects the capacity of political systems to manage distributive conflicts associated with environmental and economic

transformation, thereby influencing the political feasibility of reform. Finally, security-oriented responses to external threats may strengthen institutional protection and resilience, but—if not balanced by transparency, proportionality, and accountability—can also generate tensions with democratic norms and public trust. These mechanisms do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact in ways that may either reinforce or weaken the overall coherence of sustainability governance, democratic legitimacy, and strategic-security capacity.

In this article, SDS serves as the theoretical basis for the subsequent empirical analysis by providing a structured lens through which the relationship between the EU's sustainability objectives, democratic institutions, and strategic environment can be interpreted. While the concept of Sustainable Democratic Security (SDS) overlaps in part with related approaches such as resilience, human security, and the environment-security nexus, it should not be understood as identical to any of them. Resilience-oriented approaches generally emphasize the capacity of systems to absorb, adapt to, or recover from disruption, whereas SDS is concerned more specifically with the extent to which sustainability governance, democratic legitimacy, and strategic-security capacity are mutually conditioned within a common public governance framework. Human security approaches, by contrast, focus primarily on the protection of individuals and communities from multidimensional threats, while SDS operates mainly at the level of institutional and policy coordination in the context of EU governance. Similarly, the environment-security nexus typically examines how environmental degradation, resource scarcity, or climate stress may generate instability or conflict, whereas SDS addresses a different analytical problem: how environmental transformation, democratic stability, and strategic capacity jointly shape the feasibility, legitimacy, and continuity of long-term public policy. The analytical value of SDS therefore lies not in replacing these approaches, but in integrating insights from them into a framework better suited to examining the interdependence between sustainability, democracy, and security under contemporary conditions of geopolitical and geoeconomic pressure in the EU. Its purpose is not to replace existing theories of sustainability, democracy, or security, but to integrate them into a common analytical perspective suitable for examining long-term societal resilience in the EU.

More specifically, SDS differs from adjacent approaches such as resilience theory, human security, or the environment-security nexus in that it does not treat sustainability, democracy, and security as separate or only loosely connected policy domains, but as co-constitutive dimensions of a single governance framework. Analytically, the framework assumes that deterioration in one dimension—for example, declining democratic trust, weak sustainability performance, or insufficient strategic-security capacity—can reduce the effectiveness, legitimacy, or continuity of the others, whereas their relative alignment supports institutional trust, implementation capacity, and policy continuity. In this sense, SDS is proposed as an analytical framework for interpreting how environmental transformation, democratic stability, and strategic capacity interact within the long-term governance of the EU.

For the purposes of this study, these interactions can be summarised as four indicative causal pathways within the SDS framework. First, inclusive socio-economic policies and visible sustainability investments strengthen social cohesion and institutional trust, which in turn support the legitimacy and continuity of long term reforms. Second, external economic and technological dependencies create strategic vulnerabilities that can constrain policy autonomy and slow down or derail sustainability implementation. Third, democratic resilience shapes the capacity of political systems to manage distributive conflicts associated with environmental and socio-economic transformation, thereby influencing the political feasibility of reform. Fourth, security oriented responses to external threats can either reinforce sustainability and democratic stability—when they remain proportionate,

transparent, and accountable—or generate new tensions if they undermine civil liberties or public trust. In this sense, SDS is not merely a summary label for three adjacent domains, but a heuristic model that specifies how changes in one dimension can condition the performance and legitimacy of the others.

The Figure 1 illustrates Sustainable Democratic Security (SDS) as an integrated analytical framework composed of three mutually conditioning dimensions: sustainability governance, democratic resilience, and strategic-security capacity. The model assumes that these dimensions interact through both reinforcing and constraining mechanisms. Their relative alignment supports institutional trust, implementation capacity, policy continuity, and societal resilience, whereas deterioration in one dimension can weaken the stability and performance of the others under conditions of external pressure.

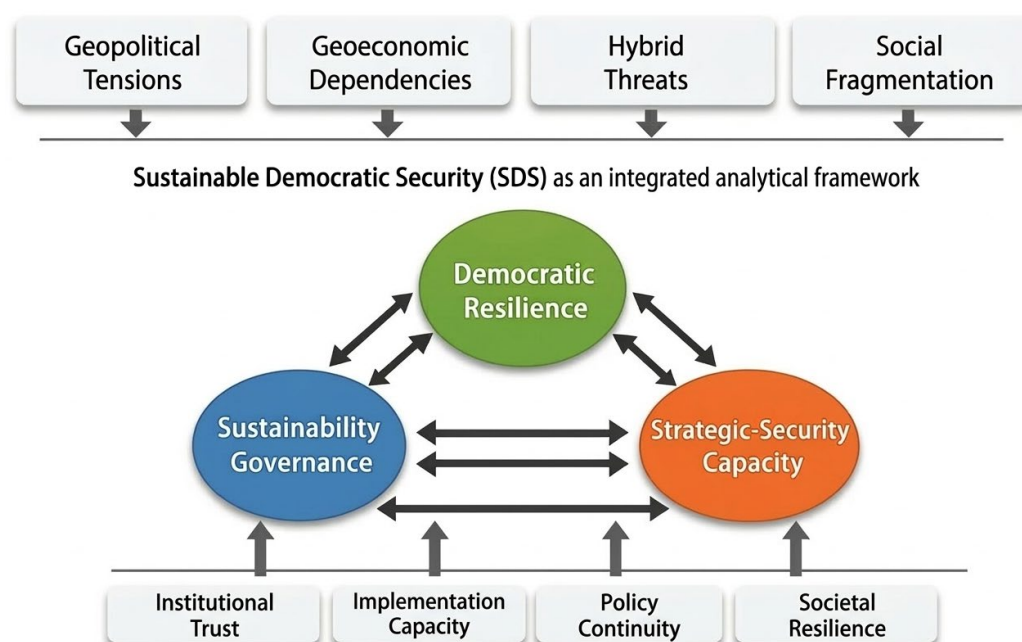


Figure 1. Sustainable Democratic Security (SDS) as an integrated analytical framework.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design and Analytical Approach

The objective of this article is to examine the relationship between sustainable development, democratic resilience, and the strategic environment of the European Union. Given the complex, multidimensional, and institutionally embedded nature of the issue under examination, the study adopts a qualitative, concept-driven research design [10,31]. This design is appropriate for analysing not only formal policy measures, but also the broader conceptual, normative, and institutional contexts through which sustainability, democracy, and security are linked in EU governance. Rather than testing causal hypotheses, the analysis is oriented toward identifying key interactions, institutional linkages, and policy-relevant tensions among these dimensions within the SDS framework.

The research is grounded in an interpretative and concept-driven qualitative framework that combines qualitative policy analysis, document analysis, a structured qualitative review of relevant scientific literature, and a comparative institutional perspective across selected dimensions of EU governance. This combination of analytical procedures is intended to strengthen interpretative robustness through source triangulation and cross-referencing between theoretical arguments, policy documents, and selected contextual indicators. The study does not claim formal comparative case-study design or quantitative generalizability;

rather, it uses comparison in an analytically focused and interpretative sense to identify patterns, convergences, and tensions across the examined policy and institutional domains.

3.2. Qualitative Policy Analysis

The core empirical component of the research consists of qualitative policy analysis, which enables a systematic examination of how the objectives of sustainable development, democratic resilience, and security are formulated, linked, and operationalized within selected EU strategic and policy documents [24,25]. This approach draws on the interpretative tradition of policy studies, which understands public policies not merely as sets of formal measures, but also as configurations of discursive frameworks, normative assumptions, institutional priorities, and practical governance arrangements through which societal problems are defined and addressed. In this article, qualitative policy analysis is used to examine how EU documents frame risks, priorities, and institutional responses at the intersection of sustainability governance, democratic resilience, and strategic-security concerns.

The analysis focuses on identifying how the selected documents construct political priorities, define risks and vulnerabilities, and articulate institutional responses across the domains of sustainability, democracy, and security. Particular attention is paid to whether, and in what ways, these documents connect environmental and socio-economic sustainability with democratic resilience and strategic-security considerations. The analytical procedure is therefore not limited to describing policy content, but also seeks to reconstruct the underlying logic, policy framing, and strategic assumptions embedded in the EU's governance approach. In methodological terms, this involves interpretative coding of recurring themes, problem definitions, and linkage patterns across the examined documents rather than formal quantitative content analysis.

The empirical material was processed through qualitative thematic coding and structured interpretative content analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring concepts, argumentative patterns, framing strategies, and institutional linkages across the selected documents. This procedure supports a systematic interpretative comparison of policy frameworks and helps to identify relationships between declared objectives, diagnosed vulnerabilities, and proposed implementation tools. The result is an analytical overview of the main trends, priorities, and tension points shaping the current trajectory of EU policies in the fields of sustainability, democratic resilience, and strategic-security governance.

3.3. Document Analysis and Empirical Sources

Document analysis focuses on the systematic examination of selected EU strategies, policy frameworks, legislative documents, and analytical reports that shape the agenda for sustainable development, democratic resilience, and security governance. These materials constitute the primary empirical sources of the study and are used to identify political priorities, institutional instruments, problem definitions, and discursive frameworks through which sustainability, resilience, and strategic-security concerns are operationalized in practice. The document sample consisted of selected EU-level strategic and policy materials published primarily between 2020 and 2025, complemented where necessary by contextual analytical reports and indicator-based assessments relevant to the same policy cycle. The selection of documents was guided by four criteria: substantive relevance to at least one of the three analytical dimensions of the SDS framework, direct connection to current EU policy priorities, institutional relevance for EU-level governance, and analytical usefulness for examining linkages between sustainability, democratic resilience, and strategic-security concerns. The selection aimed to cover the main pillars of the Union's sustainability, democracy protection and security policies, while maintaining a manageable corpus for in depth qualitative analysis.

In total, the analysed sample consisted of a purposively selected set of EU-level strategic and policy documents, complemented by analytical reports and indicator-based assessments relevant to the 2020–2025 policy cycle. The selection process was guided by an interpretative sampling logic aimed at capturing documents that are both substantively representative of current EU policy priorities and analytically informative for examining cross-sectoral linkages between sustainability, democracy, and security. Rather than aiming for exhaustive coverage, the approach prioritised relevance, comparability, and conceptual coverage across the three SDS dimensions. The analytical procedure involved iterative reading, thematic coding, and cross-referencing between documents, supported by triangulation with scholarly literature and selected contextual indicators. This procedure made it possible to identify recurring patterns, convergences, and tensions across policy domains while reducing the risk of over-reliance on any single source or document type.

The analysis specifically included documents addressing the growing role of geoeconomics and economic statecraft in the EU, as well as reports examining threats to democratic institutions and the conditions of democratic resilience. These sources were selected because they capture the external strategic pressures and internal institutional vulnerabilities relevant to the SDS framework. The assessment of sustainability performance was complemented by comparative indicators and analytical outputs published in the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2025, which provides a systematic overview of SDG implementation across EU Member States and thereby offers an empirical context for interpreting variation in sustainability-related performance.

Particular attention was also paid to initiatives aimed at protecting the information space, safeguarding the integrity of democratic processes, and strengthening the EU's capacity to respond to foreign interference and hybrid threats. In addition, the analysis considered conceptual and strategic documents reflecting the broadening of EU debate from democratic resilience toward a more security-oriented understanding of democratic protection. The broader political and institutional context was further contextualized through documents outlining the strategic priorities of the current EU policy cycle, which help situate sustainability, democracy, and security within a common governance agenda.

These sources were subjected to qualitative thematic coding and structured interpretative analysis, focusing on the identification of recurring concepts, policy instruments, problem definitions, and interlinkages between environmental, social, democratic, and strategic-security objectives. The coding process was organized around several recurring analytical themes: problem framing and diagnosed vulnerabilities; strategic objectives and policy priorities; governance and implementation instruments; institutional coordination across governance levels; and explicit or implicit linkages between sustainability, democratic resilience, and strategic-security concerns.

The analytical purpose was not to quantify the frequency of categories, but to reconstruct how the examined documents frame priorities, diagnose vulnerabilities, and articulate institutional responses across the three dimensions of the SDS framework. To reduce interpretative bias, the analysis relied on iterative cross-reading of the material, comparison across different document types, and triangulation with relevant scientific literature and contextual indicator-based evidence. The material thus processed served as the empirical foundation for the subsequent interpretative analysis presented in Section 4.

The coding process followed a structured yet flexible thematic approach. An initial codebook was developed deductively from the SDS framework (sustainability governance, democratic resilience, strategic security capacity) and inductively refined during the first round of document reading to capture recurring sub themes such as social cohesion, institutional trust, external dependence or information manipulation. Both authors independently coded a pilot subset of documents and compared coding decisions to align category bound-

aries and interpretative assumptions. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through iterative refinement of code definitions rather than through formal intercoder reliability statistics. The remaining material was then coded with this harmonised scheme, with regular cross checks between authors to minimise individual interpretative bias.

3.4. Qualitative Analysis of Scientific Literature

To provide a theoretical foundation for the empirical analysis and ensure conceptual consistency, a structured qualitative literature review was integrated into the research design. Its purpose was not merely to summarize existing knowledge, but primarily to identify the main theoretical approaches, analytical categories, and interpretative frameworks relevant to explaining the relationships between sustainability governance, democratic resilience, and the strategic-security dimension of public policy. In this study, the literature review serves both to clarify the conceptual background of the SDS framework and to support the interpretation of empirical findings within a broader interdisciplinary debate.

The selection of literature was conducted through the Web of Science and Scopus databases using combinations of keywords such as sustainable development governance, democratic resilience, economic statecraft, geopolitical risk, and EU security. The review focused primarily on peer-reviewed works offering a clear theoretical contribution to sustainability studies, political science, international relations, and security studies, while also taking into account their relevance to the conceptual objectives of the article. Preference was given to publications that addressed at least one of the three SDS dimensions directly and, where possible, to studies that also examined their institutional or policy interconnections.

This literature analysis provides the theoretical basis for interpreting the empirical findings and helps situate the evaluation of EU policies within the broader interdisciplinary knowledge of sustainability studies, political science, and security-related research. Its role is to support conceptually informed interpretation rather than to offer an exhaustive review of all relevant scholarship. In this sense, the literature review strengthens the analytical coherence of the study by linking the empirical material to the main theoretical debates underpinning the SDS framework.

3.5. Comparative Institutional Analysis

A complementary analytical component of this research is a comparative institutional perspective focused on the interactions between different levels of governance within the EU's multi-level system. Rather than constituting a formal comparative institutional design in the strict methodological sense, this perspective is used to interpret how selected governance arrangements, competences, and coordination patterns influence the relationship between sustainability, democratic resilience, and strategic-security capacity. The approach is informed by theories of multi-level and polycentric governance, which emphasize that public policy outcomes are shaped by the simultaneous interaction of supranational, national, regional, and local actors.

The analysis focuses on identifying the distribution of competences, coordination mechanisms, implementation capacities, and potential tensions between different levels of decision-making within the EU governance system. Particular attention is paid to how institutional configurations shape the implementation of sustainability objectives while also affecting the capacity to respond to democratic and strategic-security challenges. In this context, comparison is used in an interpretative and analytically focused manner to identify convergences, variations, and structural constraints across selected governance arrangements and policy domains, rather than through a formal case-based comparative design. This perspective contributes to a deeper understanding of the specificities of the European governance model, in which environmental, social, democratic, and security-

related policies are closely linked to a complex institutional architecture and the dynamics of inter-level coordination.

3.6. *Triangulation of Methods and Data*

To strengthen the analytical robustness of the study, the research applies methodological triangulation combining multiple source types and analytical perspectives. Specifically, this involves linking official EU policy and strategic documents, qualitatively analysed scientific literature, and selected quantitative indicators and statistical data—primarily assessments of SDG achievement and related socio-economic and governance indicators. In the context of this concept-driven qualitative design, triangulation serves to contextualize interpretations and to cross-reference insights derived from different forms of evidence rather than to produce formal causal verification.

The comparison of these sources serves to assess the degree of consistency and complementarity across different forms of evidence and to reduce the risk of interpretative bias associated with reliance on a single type of source. Qualitative interpretations of policy strategies are thus confronted with theoretical arguments and contextual empirical data, which strengthens the explanatory coherence of the analysis. Furthermore, the use of triangulation increases the transparency of the research process and contributes to the overall methodological rigour of the study. In the context of qualitative and interpretative research, this should be understood as strengthening the credibility and traceability of the analytical procedure rather than ensuring strict reproducibility in a positivist sense.

In terms of quantitative context, the analysis primarily drew on aggregate SDG performance scores and selected governance related indicators (such as government effectiveness, regulatory quality and control of corruption) reported in the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2025 and related datasets. These indicators were not used for formal statistical testing, but to situate the qualitative findings and thematic patterns within a comparative empirical context. In particular, variation in SDG performance and governance quality across Member States was interpreted as an indicative background for understanding differences in sustainability implementation capacity and democratic resilience rather than as a basis for causal inference.

3.7. *Methodological Limitations*

Despite efforts to ensure methodological transparency and the triangulation of multiple source types, the chosen research design has certain limitations that should be explicitly acknowledged. First, the study is based on a qualitatively oriented and concept-driven approach centred on the analysis of documents, literature, and institutional configurations. While this design enables an in-depth understanding of contextual, procedural, and interpretative relationships, it does not allow for systematic quantitative testing of causal relationships between variables. Accordingly, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically generalizable or causally verified, but rather as analytically grounded interpretations of identified trends, linkages, and institutional mechanisms.

A further limitation stems from the fact that document and policy analysis relies primarily on official and institutional sources, which reflect mainly the normative, strategic, and declarative dimensions of public policy. Such materials do not always fully capture the practical implementation of measures, informal political dynamics, or variations across national and local contexts. As a result, the interpretation of findings may be influenced by the institutional perspective embedded in the analysed documents and should be understood as focusing primarily on the formal and strategic level of EU governance.

Limitations also arise from the scope of the research, which focuses predominantly on the level of EU and national policy frameworks and pays less attention to the micro-level of

individual behaviour, local actors, or specific sectoral cases. More fine-grained insights into these dimensions would require complementary qualitative case studies, expert interviews, or quantitative survey-based research. Nevertheless, the combination of multiple analytical perspectives, systematic source analysis, and methodological triangulation provides a sufficiently strong foundation for an interpretative and conceptually oriented examination of the relationships between sustainability, democratic resilience, and strategic-security conditions in the EU. These limitations do not invalidate the presented conclusions, but rather define their scope and point to directions for future research that could refine, extend, or empirically test the relationships identified in this study through complementary methodological approaches.

4. Results

4.1. *The State of Sustainable Development in the EU and SDG Performance*

Empirical assessments of SDG implementation indicate that the EU remains among the comparatively high-performing world regions in terms of institutional capacity and the implementation of sustainability-related policies. Comparative indicators presented in the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2025 [26] show that many Member States achieve high or upper-middle scores in areas such as social protection, education, healthcare, and the quality of public services. According to the same assessment, the EU as a whole remains among the global leaders in SDG performance, although no Member State has yet achieved all goals and several targets—particularly in the areas of responsible consumption, climate adaptation, and biodiversity—remain off track or only partially fulfilled [26]. At the same time, the report also points to clear variation in overall performance across the Union, with Northern and Western European countries generally ranking more strongly, while several Southern and Southeastern Member States continue to face more persistent challenges in areas related to social inclusion, environmental performance, and implementation capacity [26]. The aggregate EU picture nevertheless suggests relatively stable performance in dimensions related to public administration effectiveness and regulatory capacity. Taken together, these findings indicate the presence of a comparatively robust institutional framework that supports the implementation of environmental and social standards across the Union, although with significant variation among Member States [26].

Environmental indicators point to gradual progress in the decarbonization of the EU economy, including a growing share of renewable energy sources and improvements in energy efficiency [3,39]. This development is accompanied by declining greenhouse gas emissions relative to earlier reference periods and by the expansion of regulatory instruments aimed at internalizing environmental externalities. At the same time, however, the EU's material and consumption footprint remains comparatively high, suggesting a continued dependence on resource-intensive patterns of production and consumption as well as on imported raw materials and external supply chains [17,28,40]. In this respect, the empirical picture is mixed: while climate and energy indicators point to gradual progress in parts of the green transition, material dependence and consumption intensity indicate that important structural pressures remain unresolved.

The social dimension of sustainability presents a more differentiated picture [37]. Although levels of extreme poverty and severe social exclusion remain comparatively low by global standards, available evidence points to persistent regional disparities between Member States as well as between urban and rural areas. Problems related to housing affordability, energy costs, and income inequality continue to generate social tensions, particularly in more vulnerable or peripheral regions. These disparities suggest that a relatively high aggregate level of SDG performance does not necessarily translate into an even distribution of socio-economic benefits across all territories and population groups [13,41].

In other words, relatively strong overall sustainability performance at the EU level coexists with uneven social outcomes that may weaken the perceived legitimacy of long-term transformative policies in specific national or regional contexts.

From an institutional perspective, Member States differ significantly in administrative capacity, particularly with regard to implementing complex reforms and effectively utilizing EU financial instruments. This unevenness is also visible in comparative SDG performance assessments, where some Member States rank consistently among the strongest overall performers, while others record weaker outcomes in goal areas related to social inclusion, governance quality, or implementation capacity [26]. While some countries demonstrate comparatively strong absorption capacity and relatively rapid adaptation to new regulatory requirements, others continue to face coordination, implementation, and governance challenges. These differences contribute to an uneven pace and depth of sustainability policy implementation across the Union [29–31]. The empirical material therefore suggests that the implementation of sustainable development in the EU is shaped not only by the existence of common strategic objectives, but also by unequal administrative and institutional capacities across Member States.

Taken together, the SDG and governance indicators suggest that higher overall sustainability performance in the EU tends to coincide with stronger governance quality and implementation capacity, whereas weaker SDG outcomes are more frequently associated with lower institutional effectiveness and more limited administrative resources. While this pattern does not establish a linear causal relationship, it supports the interpretative claim that sustainability governance and democratic institutional capacity rest on overlapping foundations, particularly in relation to the quality of public administration and the ability to absorb and implement complex reforms.

In summary, the empirical material indicates that the EU performs relatively strongly in several dimensions of sustainable development, although this performance is accompanied by internal heterogeneity and continued reliance on external economic and material flows. The findings thus point to a dual reality: comparatively strong aggregate sustainability performance at the EU level coexists with uneven territorial outcomes, persistent social disparities, and continuing structural dependencies. From the perspective developed in this article, the sustainability of the European model therefore depends not only on internal institutional capacities, but also on broader international, geopolitical, and geoeconomic conditions, thereby directly addressing the first research question concerning how geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures affect the implementation of sustainable development in the EU.

4.2. Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Pressures on the EU Model

The analysis of strategic documents and expert reports indicates that the implementation of EU sustainability policies increasingly takes place in an environment shaped by geopolitical uncertainty and intensifying geoeconomic competition. Relevant analyses suggest that economic instruments are increasingly being used to pursue political and security-related objectives, contributing to a reassessment of the traditional open-economy model [15,42,43]. The examined material further suggests that global market interconnectedness, long regarded primarily as a source of efficiency and stability, is also emerging as a potential source of vulnerability under conditions of crisis and strategic rivalry.

The analysis points to a substantial degree of dependence on external suppliers for strategic inputs, including energy commodities, critical raw materials, and key technological components [17,28,44]. This dependence is particularly visible where supply chains are geographically concentrated, increasing the EU's exposure to external disruptions, strategic leverage, and politically conditioned access to key inputs. Particularly in the fields of

critical raw materials, advanced digital technologies, and energy supply, this dependence has exposed the EU to concentration risks stemming from the limited geographic diversification of external production and supply chains. Supply-chain disruptions during recent crisis periods have exposed the concentration of production in a limited number of regions outside the EU, with implications for industrial output as well as for the implementation of environmental and digital policy objectives. These findings underscore the structural sensitivity of the European economy to external shocks and externally generated bottlenecks. In this respect, the empirical material suggests that the EU's long-term sustainability agenda is increasingly conditioned by the resilience and strategic diversification of external economic linkages rather than by internal regulatory capacity alone.

The energy sector represents a particularly visible case of this broader vulnerability. Historical dependence on imported fossil fuels has created asymmetric interdependencies that, under conditions of geopolitical tension, have translated into price volatility and risks of supply disruption. A particularly important illustration was the EU's earlier dependence on Russian fossil fuels, which became a major strategic vulnerability after 2022 and accelerated efforts to diversify supply sources, expand LNG infrastructure, and strengthen investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency [36,40,45]. At the same time, available evidence points to accelerated investment in renewable energy sources, efforts at supplier diversification, and the development of new infrastructure [36,45]. In this context, the energy transition can be interpreted not only as an environmental project, but also as a response to strategic and security-related concerns [3,38,40,45].

Similar patterns can be observed in the technological sphere. Dependence on external providers for digital platforms, semiconductors, and advanced technologies constrains the EU's capacity to shape parts of its developmental trajectory more autonomously [33,34]. In areas such as semiconductor production, cloud infrastructure, and advanced digital systems, the EU continues to rely significantly on non-EU producers and external technological ecosystems, thereby limiting its room for autonomous policy action under conditions of heightened strategic competition [33,34,46]. In response, recent policy developments point to efforts to strengthen domestic research and innovation capacities and to support strategically important industries [47]. This evolution suggests a gradual shift away from a purely market-oriented approach toward one that increasingly incorporates considerations of security, resilience, and technological sovereignty [35–38,46].

Overall, the empirical material suggests that EU sustainability policies are being implemented within a context of continued economic openness that is simultaneously associated with concentrated risks in several key sectors. The evidence from energy, supply-chain concentration, and technological dependence indicates that external vulnerabilities are not peripheral but structurally embedded in the EU development model. From this perspective, geopolitical and geoeconomic factors emerge as important external conditions shaping the EU's capacity to pursue long-term transformative strategies.

4.3. Threats to Democratic Institutions and Processes in the EU

The analysis of security-oriented reports, policy documents, and relevant research literature indicates increasing complexity in the range of risks affecting the functioning of democratic institutions within the EU. Many of these risks are non-military and hybrid in character, manifesting through combinations of information operations, cyberattacks, economic coercion, and political manipulation [6–8,48]. Relevant analyses further suggest a close relationship between democratic erosion and security instability, insofar as weakened institutions tend to be more vulnerable to external interference and systemic disruption [22,48].

A notable characteristic of the contemporary environment is the increasing importance of indirect instruments of influence targeting public opinion and decision-making processes. In the EU context, these indirect instruments include disinformation campaigns, cyber operations targeting public institutions, and coordinated attempts to exploit political polarization during periods of heightened electoral sensitivity. Digital platforms enable the rapid dissemination of manipulative or misleading content that can undermine trust in the media, electoral procedures, and public institutions [9]. The analysed material also points to the growing relevance of coordinated disinformation practices involving automated accounts, targeted messaging, and the fragmentation of the information space. Such dynamics tend to become particularly visible during election periods and in relation to politically sensitive issues such as migration, energy, and climate policy [9,20,49,50]. Recent EU-level assessments and policy documents have increasingly treated foreign information manipulation and interference as a systematic risk to democratic processes rather than as a set of isolated incidents, particularly in digitally mediated communication environments and during election periods [19–21]. This suggests that the pressure exerted on democratic institutions operates not only through direct institutional confrontation, but also through the gradual destabilization of the communicative conditions under which democratic legitimacy is reproduced.

Alongside information operations, the analysed material also points to attempts at more direct interference in political processes through support for extremist or anti-system actors, the dissemination of polarizing narratives, and the use of legal or economic pressure on public institutions. In some cases, these dynamics overlap with cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure or public administration information systems, thereby increasing operational risks and potentially weakening public trust in the state's capacity to provide essential functions [8,13]. The combination of informational, technological, and political pressure thus increases the likelihood that democratic vulnerabilities will have broader institutional and governance-related effects.

The examined material also points to growing societal polarization, manifested in declining trust in traditional political parties, the media, and expert authority [51–54]. This fragmentation of the public sphere appears to be more pronounced in settings characterized by socio-economic uncertainty, labour-market insecurity, or more limited access to public services. Consequently, democratic resilience can be understood as unevenly distributed both across Member States and within individual societies. In this sense, the empirical material suggests that democratic resilience is shaped not only by formal institutional safeguards, but also by broader social and informational conditions affecting trust, cohesion, and the capacity of citizens to evaluate competing public claims.

Overall, the analysed material suggests that the EU's democratic environment is exposed to a convergence of external and internal pressures that may weaken institutional stability and increase the sensitivity of political processes to manipulation and disruption. The evidence reviewed here indicates that these pressures are recurrent, multi-level, and increasingly embedded in the digital and socio-political environment rather than limited to exceptional episodes of interference. This provides an empirical basis for answering the second research question concerning the relationship between democratic resilience and the legitimacy, continuity, and effectiveness of sustainable development policies.

4.4. EU Policies Aimed at the Protection of Democracy

In response to the identified risks, EU institutions have introduced a series of measures aimed at strengthening the protection of democratic processes, increasing transparency, and improving coordination among Member States. The analysis of legislative and strategic documents suggests a gradual institutionalization of democracy protection as a more

distinct policy agenda within the broader framework of EU governance [19–21]. This shift is visible in the growing number of initiatives that address democratic resilience not only through value-oriented declarations, but also through more specific regulatory, coordination, and monitoring instruments.

The policy framework referred to here as the European Democracy Shield represents a broader set of measures aimed at safeguarding the information space, supporting independent media, and strengthening societal resilience [21]. The proposed or discussed mechanisms include stronger early-warning capacities against foreign interference, closer cooperation between public institutions, civil society, and research organizations, and the further development of institutional capacities for democratic resilience [39,55]. In this sense, the emerging policy approach combines preventive, coordinative, and capacity-building instruments rather than relying solely on ex post responses to specific incidents.

In parallel, the Defence of Democracy package has been presented as an instrument aimed at increasing transparency regarding foreign influence on political activities, strengthening safeguards against covert interference, and improving the protection of electoral processes [19]. These measures complement existing instruments intended to uphold rule-of-law standards, including conditionality mechanisms and regular monitoring practices related to democratic governance across Member States. Together, these initiatives indicate that democracy protection is increasingly being framed as an area requiring institutional preparedness and policy integration rather than only normative commitment.

Financial programmes supporting independent media, fact-checking initiatives, and civil society organizations also play an important role in this policy landscape [56]. The examined material suggests a gradual increase in attention and resources devoted to these activities, together with a closer linkage between security, digital, and democracy-related policy instruments. This broader policy pattern reflects an understanding that democratic resilience depends not only on formal legal safeguards, but also on the wider societal and informational infrastructure through which democratic contestation takes place.

Taken together, these measures indicate a shift from a predominantly normative promotion of values toward a more active model of protecting democratic processes through institutional and regulatory instruments. At the same time, the analysed material suggests that this evolving agenda remains embedded in a broader tension between more robust democracy protection and the need to preserve openness, proportionality, and respect for fundamental rights within the EU governance framework.

4.5. Empirical Linkages Between Sustainability and Democracy

The synthesis of findings from the preceding subsections suggests meaningful relationships between socio-economic conditions, environmental policies, and the stability of democratic institutions. The analysis of documents and selected indicators indicates that these areas are not best understood as isolated dimensions, but rather as mutually interacting components of a broader governance context [31,38]. The empirical material reviewed in this article suggests that sustainability performance and democratic resilience often rest on overlapping social and institutional foundations, particularly in relation to governance quality, public trust, and the capacity to manage distributive tensions associated with long-term reform.

In regions characterized by higher levels of social inequality, economic uncertainty, and more limited access to public services, political distrust and support for anti-system actors tend to be more pronounced [12,13,41,57]. These conditions are also associated with greater susceptibility to disinformation and polarization, suggesting an important connection between social cohesion and democratic stability. Socio-economic conditions thus appear to constitute a significant contextual factor shaping the resilience of democratic

systems [9,51]. In this respect, the empirical pattern is consistent with the broader finding that social vulnerability and institutional distrust often reinforce one another, thereby weakening both the legitimacy and the continuity of public policy.

At the same time, the examined material suggests that environmental and climate policies—particularly those aimed at improving air quality, public transport, and energy efficiency—may be associated with higher levels of public support at the local level [55,58]. Available evidence also indicates that the visible benefits of green investments can strengthen institutional trust and increase the willingness to accept further reforms [34,35]. In addition, countries characterized by higher levels of transparency, more effective public administration, and stronger forms of citizen participation tend to demonstrate more consistent implementation of SDGs [26,29]. Comparative EU evidence likewise suggests that stronger sustainability performance tends to coincide with higher institutional quality and governance capacity, whereas weaker-performing contexts more often face combined pressures linked to socio-economic inequality, lower public trust, and implementation constraints [13,26,41]. This pattern is consistent with comparative SDG assessments, which show that countries with stronger governance indicators—such as government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and control of corruption—tend to achieve more stable and consistent progress across multiple sustainability dimensions, whereas countries with weaker institutional performance more often exhibit fragmented or uneven SDG outcomes [26,29]. These characteristics are commonly associated with lower levels of corruption, higher regulatory quality, and more stable political cycles, thereby creating more favourable conditions for long-term transformative policies.

Conversely, tensions between security-oriented measures and democratic objectives can also be identified. The strengthening of regulatory and oversight mechanisms may increase administrative burdens and raise concerns about the potential restriction of civil liberties. The analysed material therefore suggests the coexistence of both synergistic and conflictual relationships between these dimensions [19,59]. More specifically, while stronger protective measures may increase resilience against interference and disruption, their legitimacy depends on whether they remain proportionate, transparent, and compatible with democratic standards and fundamental rights.

Overall, the results indicate that sustainability and democracy are interconnected through multiple socio-economic and institutional mechanisms, although the strength and direction of these linkages may vary across contexts. The empirical material does not support a simple linear causal model; rather, it points to a pattern of mutually conditioning relationships in which social cohesion, governance quality, institutional trust, and implementation capacity shape both democratic resilience and sustainability performance. This finding is central to the second research question and simultaneously creates a bridge to the third question concerning the integration of sustainability governance, democratic resilience, and strategic-security considerations into a coherent analytical and public policy framework within the EU.

5. Discussion

The findings presented in the preceding section suggest that sustainable development, geopolitical stability, and the quality of democratic institutions in the EU should not be understood as separate policy areas, but rather as interconnected dimensions of a broader governance system [10,25]. The observed patterns indicate that the implementation of SDGs depends not only on technological and economic capacities, but also on social cohesion, institutional trust, and the resilience of democratic processes under conditions of external pressure [32,60,61]. These findings provide the basis for a broader discussion of their

theoretical and public policy implications while also clarifying how the empirical results relate to the three research questions addressed in this study.

The findings indicate that, although the EU achieves a relatively high level of performance across social and environmental indicators, this performance is accompanied by internal heterogeneity and significant external economic dependence [26,27]. This dual character suggests that the sustainability of the European model is not solely a matter of internal regulatory frameworks, but is also shaped by the broader international environment [17,28,62]. In this context, geopolitical tensions, supply-chain disruptions, and energy insecurity should not be viewed merely as external disturbances, but rather as structural factors affecting the EU's capacity to pursue climate and social policies over the longer term [15,16].

At the same time, the analysis suggests that regions and states characterized by higher levels of social inequality and weaker institutional capacity may be more susceptible to political polarization and disinformation campaigns [9,12,51]. Democratic resilience thus appears to represent an important condition for the long-term implementation of transformative policies. In this sense, sustainability policies that lack sufficient political legitimacy are more likely to remain vulnerable to political contestation and cyclical shifts in public and electoral preferences [26,29,56].

While the literature on polycentric and multi-level governance emphasizes institutional coordination and adaptive capacities, and research on democratic erosion draws attention to the political and institutional risks associated with democratic weakening, the present analysis suggests that these processes should not be examined in isolation [10,22–24]. The stability of democratic institutions appears to be shaped in part by socio-economic and environmental conditions, while the success of sustainable policies is also constrained by geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures [16,17,36]. The findings therefore reinforce the need for a more integrated theoretical framework linking the environmental, political, and security dimensions of societal resilience.

From a public policy perspective, the findings point to the importance of an integrated approach that transcends traditional sectoral divisions between environmental, social, and security agendas [10,38]. The implementation of sustainability goals appears to be more effective in contexts where mechanisms supporting social cohesion, transparency, and the protection of democratic processes coexist [26,60]. Policies focused exclusively on technological transformation, without parallel efforts to address social impacts, may increase political fragmentation and weaken the legitimacy of reforms [38]. In addition, the analysis underlines the importance of investment in public goods—particularly education, local infrastructure, and high-quality public services—which can contribute to building institutional trust [12,32,60]. Such measures may also be understood as indirect but important instruments of democratic resilience [32].

However, the findings also draw attention to potential tensions associated with the increasing emphasis on security. While stronger regulatory mechanisms, efforts to protect the information space, and expanded institutional capacities may improve protection against external interference, they may also generate risks of excessive centralization and possible restrictions on civil liberties. This broader security-oriented turn may create situations in which democratic values are defended through instruments that can, under certain conditions, place pressure on those same values. Maintaining an appropriate balance between security objectives and the protection of fundamental rights therefore appears to be an important condition of policy legitimacy. Without such a balance, a paradox may emerge in which measures adopted to defend democracy weaken some of the principles of an open society.

Based on the synthesis of the findings and the preceding theoretical discussion, this article proposes an integrated analytical framework termed ‘Sustainable Democratic Security’ (SDS). This framework conceptualizes sustainability, democratic resilience, and strategic-security capacity as three interconnected pillars. Sustainable development provides material and environmental conditions of stability, democratic institutions ensure legitimacy and participation, and strategic-security capacity helps protect the system against external shocks and systemic disruptions. A weakening in any one of these dimensions may reduce the coherence and effectiveness of the broader system. In this sense, the framework moves beyond traditional sectoral approaches and enables the analysis of EU policies as part of a more integrated project of societal resilience.

In summary, the findings suggest that within the EU, sustainable development, democratic stability, and security resilience should not be understood as separate policy domains, but rather as mutually conditioning dimensions of a broader governance framework. The analysis indicates that socio-economic cohesion and the quality of public institutions are important conditions for the effective implementation of environmental and transformative policies, while geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures also shape their feasibility and political sustainability. Sustainability without sufficient democratic legitimacy is likely to remain vulnerable to contestation and discontinuity, just as the protection of democracy without addressing social and environmental imbalances risks losing part of its material foundation. It therefore appears necessary to move beyond a traditionally sectoral understanding of public policy and to approach sustainability, security, and democracy as an integrated strategic whole. This conceptual linkage forms the theoretical and practical basis of the ‘Sustainable Democratic Security’ model, which constitutes the principal synthetic contribution of this study.

6. Conclusions

This study has analysed the relationship between sustainable development, democratic resilience, and the geopolitical-security environment of the EU, with the aim of examining the extent of their interdependence and identifying the implications for public policymaking. In doing so, it addressed a gap in the existing literature, which has often examined these areas separately despite their increasingly visible empirical and institutional interconnections.

The empirical analysis suggests that the EU achieves a relatively high level of SDG fulfilment and possesses substantial regulatory and institutional capacity. At the same time, this performance is accompanied by growing internal heterogeneity, regional inequalities, and significant dependence on external supply chains, energy flows, and technological capacities. Geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures therefore appear not merely as external shocks, but as structural factors that shape the feasibility of transformative policies. The findings also indicate that social fragmentation, inequality, and weakened institutional trust increase the vulnerability of democratic systems to disinformation, hybrid threats, and foreign interference, making democratic stability an important prerequisite for long-term sustainability.

Taken together, these findings provide a grounded response to the research questions formulated at the outset. First, geopolitical and geoeconomic pressures significantly shape the implementation of sustainable development by creating new forms of dependence and constraining the Union’s strategic-security capacity. Second, the quality of democratic institutions and the level of societal trust condition the capacity to realise long-term reforms and maintain policy continuity. Third, the effective integration of the sustainability agenda and the protection of democracy require a coordinated, cross-sectoral, and multi-level approach that transcends traditional sectoral divisions in public policy.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in extending the sustainable development discourse through the inclusion of an explicit politico-security dimension. The proposed concept of Sustainable Democratic Security (SDS) integrates insights from sustainability governance, theories of democratic resilience, and geoeconomics into a unified analytical framework. This framework makes it possible to understand environmental, social, and security factors as complementary conditions of societal resilience. Sustainability thus emerges not merely as a technical or economic transformation, but as a broader project of institutional legitimacy, participation, and strategic-security capacity.

From a public policy perspective, the findings highlight the need to link environmental reforms more systematically with social cohesion and the protection of democratic processes. Investment in public services, the reduction in inequalities, and the strengthening of transparency and citizen participation appear to be no less important to the success of the green transition than technological innovation or regulatory instruments. At the same time, it remains essential to maintain a balance between security measures and the protection of fundamental rights, ensuring that the defence of democracy is not pursued through means that weaken its normative foundations.

The study has certain limitations resulting from the qualitative nature of the research and its focus on the institutional level of analysis. Future research could extend these findings through quantitative testing of the relationships between sustainability indicators and the quality of democracy, or through comparative case studies of individual Member States. The comparative institutional perspective adopted in this article is therefore interpretative rather than based on a formal case study design, and future research could further operationalise the SDS framework through systematic cross-national comparisons or mixed methods studies.

Overall, the findings suggest that the long-term stability and transformative capacity of the EU depend on the simultaneous strengthening of sustainability, democracy, and security as interconnected pillars of a broader institutional system. The future of European transformation therefore lies not in the isolated resolution of individual policy agendas, but in their strategic integration into a coherent governance framework capable of supporting environmental ambitions, social justice, and the protection of democratic values.

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