

Call for Papers



Ecological Ungovernability?

civic empowerment – state overload – ungoverning

International Research Conference

23-25 September 2026

Institute for Social Change and Sustainability (IGN)

Vienna University of Economics and Business

Academic Steering Committee: Lena Alwang, Ingolfur Blühdorn, Daniel Hausknost, Veith Selk, Benjamin Seyd

Did environmental movements overestimate the civic capabilities of citizens? Were conservatives in the 1970s right when they suspected the *participatory revolution* would trigger a crisis of democracy? Has civic empowerment led to late-modern hyper-politicization and the revolt against ecological efforts, democratic institutions and the administrative bodies of the liberal state?

About a decade ago, some observers first diagnosed ‘the end of sustainability’ as an eco-political lead concept (e.g. Foster 2014, Benson & Craig 2016); today neither the alarming biophysical trajectories predicted by climate scientists nor ever growing social inequalities trigger significant mobilization. After the mass protests seen at the end of last decade and the European Parliament’s declaration of climate emergency, the demand for transformative action seems largely exhausted. Instead, there is an unprecedented attack on international and democratic institutions. The willful destruction of governance and the normalization of political chaos have been described as *ungoverning* (Muirhead & Rosenblum 2024).

The rollback of social and environmental policies enjoys widespread support. The open denial of climate change meets little political resistance. Post-COVID societies, amid shifting geopolitical constellations and ongoing military aggression, are experiencing a *defensive turn* (Seyd 2025): the retreat to the protection of material wealth, social stability, and lifestyles perceived as non-negotiable late-modern achievements. The apocalyptic scenarios long anticipated by eco-activists and sustainability researchers have not played out as expected – or are being deproblematized. Ecological policy has been reduced to a technocratic agenda of decarbonization, largely stripped of a transformative social dimension. What remains is a consensus of defense, intent on safeguarding existing structures and privileges.

This research conference investigates late-modern eco-politics through the lens of the *dialectic* of eco-emancipatory hopes and beliefs. The concept *ecological ungovernability* has been suggested to describe the radical opposite to the claims of personal and collective self-determination and political efficacy advanced by the New Social Movements of the 1970s and 1980s (Blühdorn 2025). It aims to capture the exhaustion of bottom-up trust in democratic empowerment, of the belief in technocratic promises of ecological modernization and in the capabilities of the liberal state – and it opens a new field of academic inquiry into how late-modern societies manage ecological crises under conditions of hyper-complexity, institutional overload, and civic exhaustion (Selk & Klüh 2025).

Historically, the current impasse recalls debates of the 1970s when the unfolding *participatory revolution* (Kaase 1984) raised concerns about anticipated limits of state capacity. In that context, questions of civic empowerment, *state overload*, and ungoverning were already central to understanding the boundaries of political agency (Huntington 1975, King 1975). Today, the notion of the *glass ceiling of transformation* revisits this problematic, pointing to the structural constraints that prevent states from realizing profound socio-ecological change (Hausknost 2020). At the same time, unprecedented complexity, hyper-politicization and geopolitical tensions give rise to phenomena of eco-political sclerosis and self-paralysis. And the far-right revolt against the institutions of liberal democracy and the liberal state seems even more disruptive than the 1990s' policies of depoliticization.

In line with the IGN's long-standing engagement with societal transformations constraining socio-ecological sustainability, the conference focuses on so-called advanced or late-modern societies where the urgency of transformation collides with the defense of unbounded notions of freedom. It traces the political and institutional origins of ecological ungovernability, examines its current expressions in civic fatigue, state overload, and eco-political blockade, and situates these within broader genealogies of authoritarian liberalism and shifting paradigms of governability (Chamayou 2021).

The conference will have three thematic strands:

A) Retrospectives and conceptual work on (ecological) ungovernability

Does the earlier literature on *ungovernability* offer resources for understanding the predicament of current eco-politics? What were the arguments and concerns? What were the counterarguments and hopes? Which fears or hopes have (not) come true? What are the sociological underpinnings of the syndrome today?

B) Ecological ungovernability in practice – Empirical case studies

...on phenomena of participatory sclerosis, democratic self-blockade and political disillusionment in late-modern societies, also including cases illustrating the limits of ethical voluntarism and the shift of emphasis towards exercises of preparation (prepping) for an anticipated condition of lawlessness, the rule of the strongest, and the ruthless defense of non-generalizable claims forms of self-realization.

C) Contemporary *ungoverning* and beyond

To what extent can neoliberal strategies of depoliticization be regarded as precursors of today's practices of ungoverning? How did they impact eco-politics? How does the destruction of administrative capacities transform democratic governance today? Are there escape routes (actors, strategies, perspectives) from ungovernability or even newly emerging institutional orders?

To allow for intensive discussion, the number of participants is restricted. Some of the attendees will contribute by invitation. This call for papers addresses itself to scholars from all academic subject disciplines who are engaged in original and innovative work on the topic. Full draft papers need to be submitted and will be circulated in advance. Participants are expected to contribute original unpublished work. In line with established IGN practice, we envisage peer reviewed publications with a major academic press and/or as special issues of fully reviewed international journals¹. Participants are expected to attend the full conference. There is no conference fee. Limited travel and accommodation support might be available.

Schedule for submitting abstracts (400 words) and full draft papers (6.000 words):

Deadline for abstracts:	01 February 2026
Notification of acceptance:	22 February 2026
Deadline for full draft papers:	31 August 2026
Please send your abstracts to:	ign@wu.ac.at

References

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- Chamayou, Grégoire. *The ungovernable society: A genealogy of authoritarian liberalism*. John Wiley & Sons, 2021.
- Benson, Melinda Harm, and Robin Kundis Craig. *The end of sustainability: resilience and the future of environmental governance in the Anthropocene*. University Press of Kansas, 2017.
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- Hausknost, Daniel. The environmental state and the glass ceiling of transformation. *Environmental politics* 29.1 (2020): 17-37.
- Huntington, Samuel P. The democratic distemper. *The public interest* 41 (1975): 9.
- Kaase, Max. The Challenge of the *Participatory Revolution* in Pluralist Democracies. *International Political Science Review* 5.3 (1984): 299-318.
- King, Anthony. Overload: Problems of Governing in the 1970s. *Political studies* 23.2-3 (1975): 284-296.
- Rosenblum, Nancy L., / Russell Muirhead. *Ungoverning: The attack on the administrative state and the politics of Chaos*. Princeton University Press, 2024.
- Selk, Veith / Niklas Klüh. From Liberal Paralysis to Green Republican Resolution? Conceptualising, Illustrating, and Addressing Problems of Governability in Eco-Social Politics. *Frontiers in Political Science* 7 (2025).
- Seyd, Benjamin. A crisis of crisis management: The polycrisis, the organization of pessimism, and the defensive turn. *European Journal of Social Theory* 28.4 (2025): 644-671.

¹most recent examples include:

[‘Beyond the Eco-emancipatory Project: Socio-ecological Crisis and the Metamorphosis of Modernity’. Special Issue edited by Ingolfur Blühdorn and Benjamin Seyd. *European Journal of Social Theory* 28.4 \(2025\).](#)

[‘Revisiting the Promises of Eco-Political Experimentation: Achievements, Appropriations, Limits’. Special Issue edited by Margaret Haderer, Hauke Dannemann and Ingolfur Blühdorn. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 20.1 \(2024\)](#)