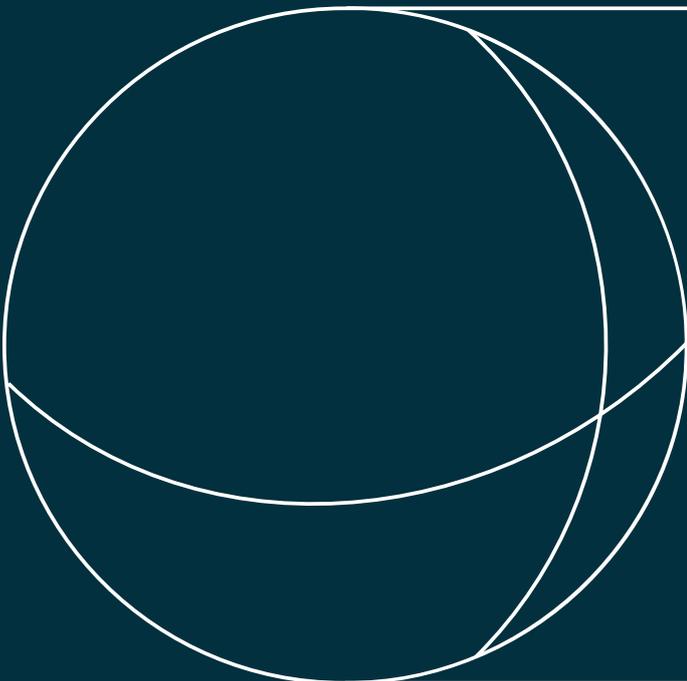ENSURED

Shaping cooperation
for a world in transition

research report

Pathways for Global Governance Transformation:
Evidence from 15 Case Studies

Lead authors: Henning Schmidtke (European University Institute) and Stephanie C. Hofmann (European University Institute)

March 2026

Abstract

The demand for global governance remains high, yet effective multilateral cooperation is increasingly scarce. Governments continue to rely on international cooperation to address climate change, pandemics, digitalisation, migration, and global inequality. However, both increasing rivalry among major powers and political polarisation within established democracies make reaching agreements within existing multilateral institutions more difficult. As a result, cooperation occurs across a broader range of institutional settings. Drawing on 15 ENSURED case studies and the ENSURED expert survey, this report traces these transformations across five policy areas: trade and inequality, climate and biodiversity, global health, migration and human rights, and digitalisation. The analysis focuses on three pathways of global governance transformation: minilateralisation, regionalisation, and counter-institutionalisation. Across all five policy areas, governance has become more institutionally diverse. While multilateral institutions remain important, they rarely fulfil all essential governance functions – such as agenda-setting, regulatory decision-making, or operational implementation – independently. Taken together, these dynamics give rise to a system best described as *variable geometry*, in which different institutional forms interact in shifting, context-specific ways. The concrete geometry of governance varies across policy areas and over time, shaped by problem structures, power dynamics, and political alignment. This system produces trade-offs in the robustness, effectiveness, and democratic quality of global governance.

Citation Recommendation

Table of Contents

Introduction

For decades, multilateralism has been the default mode of global governance, but it is now facing multiple challenges. Many international organisations (IOs) established to facilitate cooperation after the Second World War – including the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations (UN) – are struggling with rising political tensions among member states and declining public trust, which limits their ability to address global issues effectively. In particular, the changing distribution of power and ideological polarisation among states – driven by the re-emergence of nationalist populism and the parallel erosion of democracy – raises questions about the robustness, effectiveness, and democratic legitimacy of multilateral governance. Together, these dynamics contribute to a broader perception that the liberal international order is in crisis (Lake et al. 2021; Weinhardt and Dijkstra 2024).

> Nearly every major challenge of our time transcends national borders and requires collective action.

Yet the demand for international cooperation has not diminished. Nearly every major challenge of our time – including climate change, pandemics, inequality, mass displacement, and the digital transformation – transcends national borders and requires collective action. The conceptual framework of the ENSURED project (Choi et al. 2024) focuses on three analytically central pathways through which cooperation is provided. The first is minilateralisation. To overcome gridlock in multilateral negotiations, small groups of powerful states cooperate in less inclusive, informal club-based arrangements, such as the G20 or plurilateral trade agreements. A second alternative is regionalisation, in which governance is delivered by regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) or the European Union (EU). Finally, counter-institutionalisation describes a more fundamental shift in how cooperation is organised. Here, states move from a community-based, problem-solving mode of cooperation to a more competitive and strategic approach. Rather than seeking compromise within established institutions, states create or rely on alternative mechanisms to advance their preferences. China's leadership in establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as well as US-driven initiatives such as the Board of Peace are often cited as examples. Together, these pathways have become regular features of today's global governance landscape.

This report takes these three pathways as its starting point, asking where global governance is becoming more minilateral, more regional, or more shaped by counter-institutional dynamics. The analysis draws on two central sources of evidence generated within the ENSURED project. First, the report synthesises findings from 15 qualitative case studies across five major policy areas: trade and inequality, climate and biodiversity, global health, migration and human rights, and digitalisation.[1] These case

---

1   The case study reports are available on the ENSURED website (ensuredeurope.eu). They include Boukal et al. 2025; Bursi and Greco 2025; Choi and Liese 2025; Fernández and Heinzel 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Hoxtell 2025; King and Pousadela 2025; Kustova et al. 2025; Marconi and Greco 2025; Parizek and Weinhardt 2025; Peerboom et al. 2025; Petri and Karlas 2025; Petri et al. 2025; Weinhardt et al. 2025.

studies were analysed using an analytical scheme that distinguishes three levels for each pathway. A pathway is coded as *absent* when it plays no meaningful role in the governance of a policy area, as *moderate* when it complements or partially replaces established multilateral institutions, and as *strong* when it becomes a central driver of governance, displacing or competing with existing multilateral arrangements. Second, the report draws on the ENSURED expert survey, conducted between August and September 2025 with 763 academic experts from 48 countries. This survey offers unique insights into how experts anticipate the three pathways to evolve through 2030. By combining these sources, the report provides detailed case-based evidence and broader comparative judgements on the prospects for international cooperation worldwide (Verhaegen et al. 2025).

Established multilateral bodies frequently operate alongside minilateral clubs and regional organisations that pursue openly competitive agendas.

Three key findings stand out. First, governance has become more institutionally diverse across the five policy areas, as cooperation is rarely organised around a multilateral IO that performs all core functions. Instead, established multilateral bodies frequently operate alongside minilateral clubs and regional organisations that, in some cases, pursue openly competitive agendas. This competitive fragmentation is evident in trade governance, where plurilateral and regional agreements compete with WTO rules. A similar pattern can be observed in global health and digitalisation governance, where multiple forums share responsibilities for financing, standard-setting, and implementation.

Second, the concrete configuration of governance varies considerably across policy areas and over time. Climate governance remains closest to a classic multilateral configuration, with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement anchoring cooperation, while other formats primarily support coordination and implementation. Global health, migration, and human rights exhibit a more layered configuration, in which alternative institutional forms assume specific governance functions without entirely replacing multilateral institutions. By contrast, trade and digitalisation governance is characterised by high fragmentation and competition among multiple minilateral, regional, and counter-institutional forums.

Finally, these differences can be explained by a combination of three factors. First, where cooperation problems are highly interdependent and long-term, as in climate governance, multilateral institutions tend to retain a central role even as new complementary minilateral and regional arrangements emerge around them. By contrast, problems shaped by rapid technological innovation or fast-moving economic dynamics, such as in the fields of digitalisation or trade, are more readily addressed by alternative – and competitive – minilateral and regional governance arrangements. Second, shifts in power among states also shape governance configurations. Rising powers are more likely to promote alternative venues when established institutions reflect past power distributions, while established states often seek to defend multilateral arrangements that safeguard their interests. Third, political alignment among participating states is a crucial factor. Where major powers share

basic goals, alternative governance arrangements frequently remain connected to established multilateral frameworks. Conversely, where alignment erodes due to the perception of diminishing returns from a multilateral institution, cooperation is more likely to fragment and assume competitive forms.

In sum, contemporary global governance operates through a *variable geometry*, characterised by functionally differentiated institutional arrangements that interact in context-specific ways. The result is neither institutional breakdown nor coherent hierarchy, but a differentiated order structured through overlapping and shifting centres of authority. The specific combination of multilateral institutions, minilateral initiatives, regional arrangements, and more competitive forms of cooperation changes over time, depending on the demands of the cooperation problem, power relations, and political alignment among key states. These configurations rarely result from deliberate design; rather, they emerge, loosen, and sometimes reconverge in complex ways. As a result, global governance has become less predictable, with authority more dispersed and coordination more difficult to sustain. Effective cooperation for established actors therefore requires greater attention, resources, and active management than in the past. At the same time, this fluidity creates opportunities for adaptation. States can leverage the comparative advantages of different types of institutions more flexibly, and carefully tailored combinations of institutions can respond more effectively to emerging challenges (Faude and Abbott 2025; Haftel and Hofmann 2025). As Mark Carney recently put it at the World Economic Forum: "to help solve global problems, we're pursuing variable geometry – in other words, different coalitions for different issues based on common values and interests." (Carney 2026)

The report develops this argument in four steps. It first maps minilateralisation, regionalisation, and counter-institutionalisation, analysing how each pathway has affected governance across the five policy areas in recent years. It then synthesises these findings to show how the pathways combine into distinct governance configurations and what this variable geometry implies for established understandings of multilateralism. Finally, the conclusion considers the implications of these findings for both the theory and practice of global governance.

Minilateralisation of Global Governance

Following ENSURED's conceptual framework, we understand minilateralism as an alternative institutional form of global governance, characterised by informal cooperation among a small number of states (Choi et al. 2024). This type of cooperation takes place in small-group initiatives under the umbrella of multilateral IOs, such as the plurilateral WTO agreements; club-like IOs, such as the OECD; informal IOs, such as the G20; coalitions of the willing, including the International Contact Group on Afghanistan; or informal arrangements built around a specific policy area, such as the Climate Club launched by the G7. The core idea is simple: "bring together the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem" (Naím 2009, 135). This form of cooperation now appears across many policy areas, with important implications for the quality of global governance. ENSURED research points to three broad effects on robustness, effectiveness, and democratic legitimacy.

> Minilateralism is an alternative institutional form of global governance, characterised by informal cooperation among a small number of states.

First, minilateralisation can strengthen robustness by adding alternative forums where state preferences are more closely aligned. When global bodies are blocked, minilateral forums can still function because participating states share similar priorities. Yet this form of cooperation can also reduce the overall robustness of global governance. Due to its informal nature, minilateral cooperation tends to be volatile and less robust. When participating states disagree over the use of financial resources or personnel, they can easily withdraw their support (Weinhardt and Dijkstra 2024).

Second, effectiveness can increase as minilateral coalitions achieve concrete results that larger bodies cannot. Informal cooperation among like-minded states often produces decisions of sufficient ambition and speed to address intersecting policy challenges (Schmidtke and Hofmann 2025). However, compliance with rules negotiated in a minilateral context is often weak, as agreements are non-binding or lack enforcement mechanisms. Moreover, minilateral governance can undermine overall policy-area governance. As informal coalitions struggle to secure global participation, minilateralisation fragments global governance by creating potentially conflicting rules that enable states to pick and choose (Sommerer and Liese 2024).

Finally, democratic quality tends to decline with minilateralisation. Restricted participation and informal procedures reduce transparency, prioritise resource-rich actors, limit participation by smaller states, and constrain entry points for civil society. Accountability also becomes more difficult when decision-making shifts into informal spaces that lack transparency (Sommerer and Liese 2024).

Figure 1 displays the prominence of minilateralisation across the 15 ENSURED case studies, highlighting where informal small-group cooperation is becoming central, where it plays a supporting role, and where it is largely absent. Each dot represents one case study, grouped by the policy areas of trade and inequality, climate and biodiversity, global health, migration and human rights, and digitalisation. The horizontal line in each panel indicates the average level of minilateralisation within that area.

Minilateralism has become a regular feature of global governance.

Three central observations stand out. First, minilateralism has become a regular feature of global governance across all policy areas covered by the ENSURED project. Only five of the 15 case studies report no such activity (those covering biodiversity, the Pandemic Agreement, UNHCR reform, gender, and artificial intelligence [AI]). This makes minilateralism a system-wide feature rather than an isolated phenomenon confined to a specific policy area. Trade and taxation governance stands out, with all three case studies exhibiting some form of minilateralisation, including the emergence of plurilateral arrangements within the WTO and the G20-led effort to curb global tax avoidance. Notably, trade and taxation governance is the only policy area without a single case coded as "absent," which underscores how deeply minilateral approaches have become embedded in this domain.[2]

Second, levels of minilateralisation vary considerably across policy areas. In trade governance, minilateral formats form part of the core governance architecture rather than serving as temporary supplements. Digitalisation occupies an intermediate position. Cryptocurrency governance primarily relies on minilateral arrangements, while cyberspace regulation includes a moderate minilateral aspect. In contrast, AI governance is based on multilateral and regional frameworks. Consequently, the overall level of minilateralisation in digital governance is lower than in trade but higher than in other policy areas. By contrast, climate, global health, and human rights governance display significant limits to minilateralisation. Several case studies in these areas show little or no minilateral activity (i.e., those covering biodiversity, the Pandemic Agreement, UNHCR reform, gender, and AI). Multilateral institutions remain primary governance venues, while limited minilateral initiatives tend to focus on specific tasks or implementation challenges.

---

2   In trade governance, minilateral agreements are often labeled 'plurilaterals.'

Figure 1: Minilateralisation Across ENSURED Case Studies
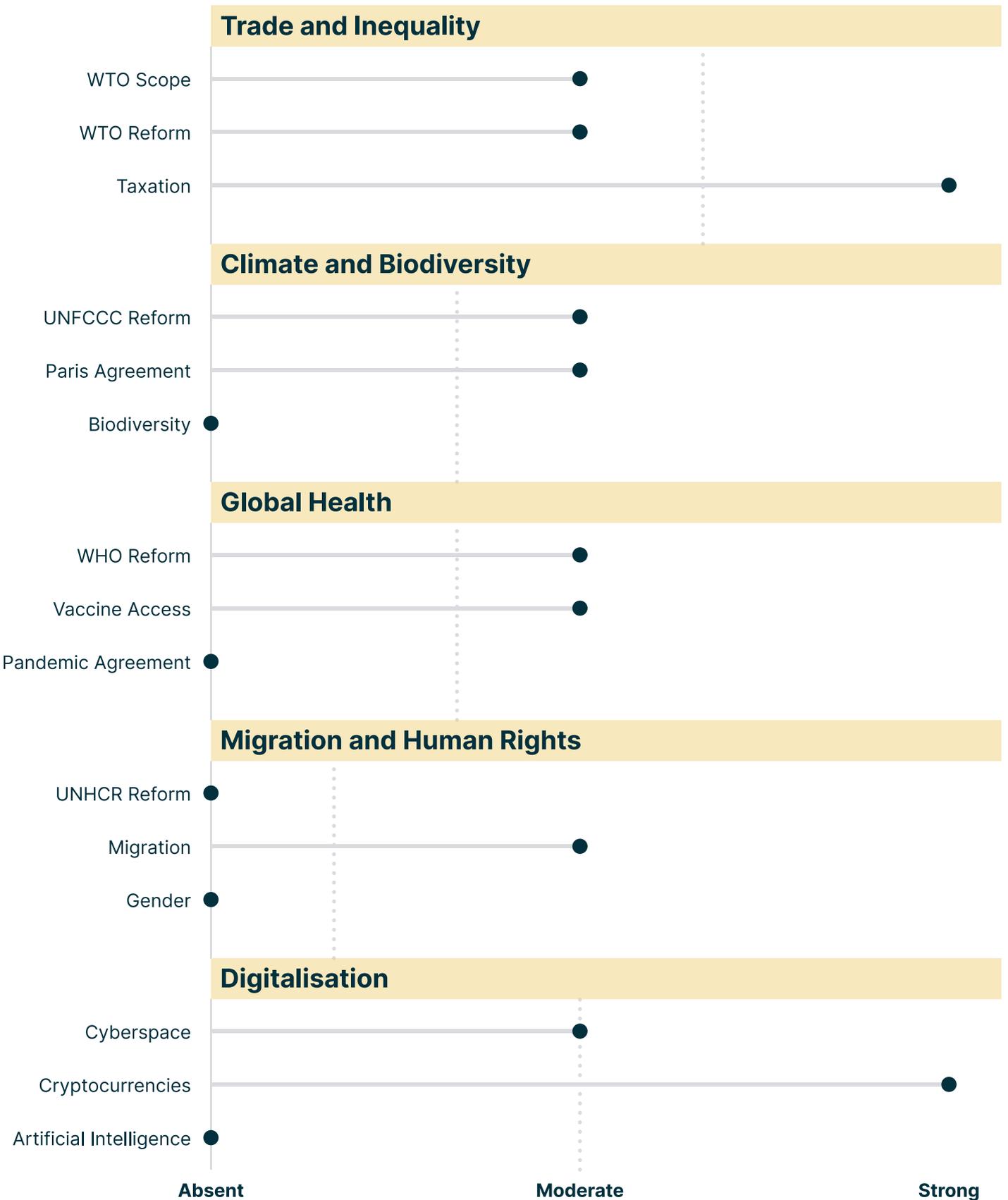
Dotted line marks the issue-area average.

Finally, minilateralisation also varies within policy areas and over time. Some fields exhibit a steady reliance on minilateral formats; others have only recently moved toward them; and a third group has remained broadly multilateral. Digitalisation illustrates all three dynamics within a single policy area. Cryptocurrency governance, for example, has followed a stable minilateral path since it emerged as an issue for international cooperation, relying from the outset on specialised standard-setting bodies. By contrast, cybersecurity has seen a gradual shift toward minilateral institutions as deepening tensions among participating states have stalled UN-based negotiations. AI governance follows a third trajectory. After a period of fragmented expert group discussions on voluntary principles, states have recently moved toward a more formal and inclusive approach through the Council of Europe's (CoE) globally accessible AI treaty. Although negotiated within a regional organisation, the treaty is open to all states, marking a shift away from expert-driven minilateralism toward multilateralism. Trade governance most clearly illustrates the transition from multilateral to minilateral forums. Due to persistent deadlock in the WTO, states increasingly rely on plurilateral Joint Statement Initiatives and the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement. Across trade-related cases, minilateral solutions have become substitutes for stalled multilateral negotiations rather than temporary complements. By contrast, climate, global health, and human rights governance remain largely anchored in multilateralism. In these fields, multilateral institutions continue to underpin rule-making, even amid political contestation, while minilateral initiatives, where they exist, play a limited supporting role.

The differences between policy areas and their respective temporal dynamics are linked to the positions of powerful states. In several cases, ENSURED research shows that minilateralism does not arise because states prefer it in principle, but because key actors resist binding multilateral commitments. Trade governance exemplifies this logic. The US has repeatedly challenged the WTO's dispute settlement system, while India has defended the consensus rule and resisted new obligations in areas such as e-commerce. China, for its part, supports WTO reform selectively but opposes changes that would constrain its state-led economic model. Faced with these conflicting positions, the WTO's multilateral initiatives have stalled, prompting members to pursue plurilateral initiatives to maintain cooperation. A similar dynamic occurs in digitalisation. In cybersecurity, profound disagreement among the US, China, and Russia over central norms has limited multilateral progress and encouraged cooperation among smaller groups of like-minded states.

By contrast, reversion to more inclusive arrangements tends to occur when club-based governance lacks legitimacy or when excluded actors organise collectively. In global tax governance, coordinated pressure from Global South nations challenged the OECD-led process and pushed negotiations toward the UN. In AI, the limited effectiveness of minilateral expert groups and voluntary principles spurred the creation of a broader, rules-based framework under the CoE.

Taken together, these patterns show that minilateralisation is not a one-directional process. Some fields drift toward clubs when multilateral forums stall, others revert to more inclusive arrangements when political pressure
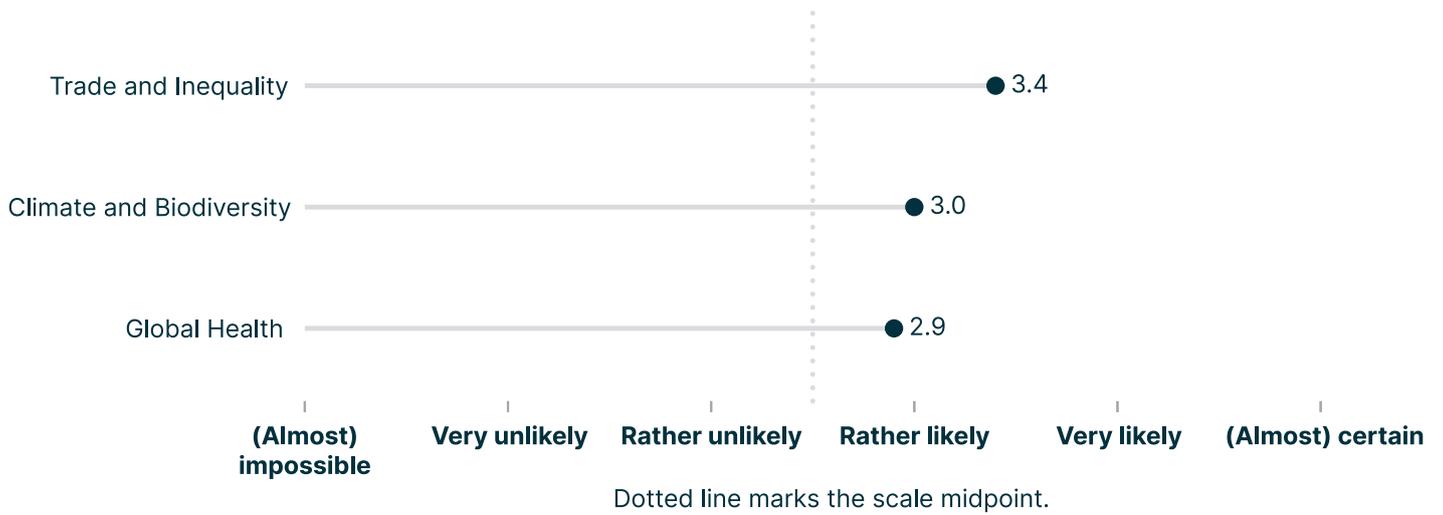
builds, and several remain firmly anchored in the multilateral core. This fluidity creates strategic opportunities for supporters of multilateralism, including the EU. The tax case is particularly instructive. It demonstrates that the EU can no longer rely exclusively on established partnerships in the Global North. By engaging with states in the Global South, the EU helped open the path from an OECD-led process to universal UN-based negotiations. This approach not only enhanced the legitimacy of global tax reform but also strengthened the EU's credibility as an actor willing to invest in multilateral solutions. A similar strategy is visible in AI governance, where the EU worked through a regional organisation while supporting a treaty open to all states, combining regional leadership with global accessibility. Overall, these examples suggest that the EU can help steer cooperation away from minilateralism when legitimacy is at risk and can leverage regional and cross-regional institutions and coalitions to rebuild momentum for more inclusive multilateral rule-making.

> The fluidity of minilateralisation creates strategic opportunities for supporters of multilateralism, including the EU.

The ENSURED expert survey offers a perspective on the potential future development of global governance (*Figure 2*). When asked about the likelihood that minilateralism will become more prominent by 2030, respondents said they anticipate this trend to expand across policy areas. All average scores indicate that minilateral approaches are regarded as a permanent element of global governance as opposed to a short-term reaction to current challenges.

In trade and tax governance, experts see continued minilateralisation as very likely. This aligns closely with the ENSURED case studies, which show how slow progress in the WTO, a growing reliance on plurilateral initiatives, and the continued centrality of the G20/OECD in tax cooperation have opened alternative paths to multilateralism. In climate and health governance, experts consider minilateralisation as rather likely. Although ENSURED case studies show that the UN climate regime remains the central forum, small groups are already shaping cooperation in specific areas, including methane reduction, green industrial policy, and sectoral standards. Experts are signalling that they expect these selective initiatives to expand. A similar pattern appears in the realm of health policy. Core rule-making remains universal – as illustrated by the WHO pandemic negotiations – yet financing, access to technology, and implementation often rely on narrower coalitions and public-private partnerships. These results suggest that experts anticipate the persistence of mixed patterns, with minilateral formats gaining importance while not entirely replacing multilateral structures.

Figure 2: How Likely Is Minilateralism to Grow by 2030?[3]

	(Almost) impossible	Very unlikely	Rather unlikely	Rather likely	Very likely	(Almost) certain
Trade and Inequality				● 3.4		
Climate and Biodiversity				● 3.0		
Global Health				● 2.9		

Dotted line marks the scale midpoint.

Taken together, the survey results reinforce the central patterns identified in the ENSURED case studies. Within ENSURED's analytical scope, survey respondents expect minilateralism to grow in areas where cooperation is politically sensitive, technically complex, or stalled within multilateral IOs. By contrast, experts predict more legitimacy-dependent policy areas to continue to blend multilateral and minilateral institutions.

---

3   The ENSURED expert survey only includes questions pertaining to trade, security, climate, and health. For this reason, the migration and digitalisation policy areas are not displayed in Figures 2, 4, and 6.

Regionalisation of Global Governance

ENSURED's conceptual framework characterises regionalisation as a shift in institutional form from inclusive, global cooperation to a more limited one based on geographical proximity, mutual interdependence, and shared political and cultural norms among participating states (Choi et al. 2024). Such regional arrangements aim to enhance cooperation among a subset of states within formal regional international organisations (RIOs). Today, general-purpose RIOs operate in every world region. These include the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union (EU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Organization of American States (OAS), the League of Arab States (LoAS), and the Pacific Island Forum (PIF). While these organisations address a broad range of issues, there are also more specialised RIOs focusing on specific areas. Examples include the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which concentrates on economics and security; the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), which deals with trade; the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), which promotes sustainability; the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which focuses on health; and the Asian Forest Cooperation Organization (AFoCO), which is dedicated to forest governance. These organisations engage in nearly all areas of international cooperation, exerting a significant influence on the quality of global governance (Börzel and Risse 2016). ENSURED research highlights three major effects on robustness, effectiveness, and democratic quality.

First, regionalisation can strengthen robustness by providing alternative forums where state preferences are more closely aligned. When global bodies are blocked, RIOs often continue to function because participating states are highly interdependent and share similar priorities. Yet regionalisation may also weaken global governance, as shifting decision-making authority, financial resources, and personnel to the regional level may undermine the capacity of global IOs (Weinhardt and Dijkstra 2024).

Second, effectiveness can improve when RIOs offer solutions tailored to local circumstances rather than applying general global rules. Trade rules or security frameworks can be adapted to address specific regional needs and institutional capacities, making them more responsive to local contexts. However, regional solutions often do not scale effectively to the global level. Measures that work for a particular group of states may conflict with multilateral rules or duplicate existing standards, leading to forum shopping and undermining compliance with global regulations (Sommerer and Liese 2024).

Finally, democratic quality is likely to change in more complex ways. RIOs are often closer to the populations they serve and can therefore rely on greater popular legitimacy and accountability. In practice, however, RIOs differ widely in terms of democratic participation and accountability. Some provide multiple mechanisms for participation and accountability, while others offer only limited parliamentary oversight and access for civil

society. Furthermore, when regional blocs operate on the global stage, they may also limit the influence of smaller states within their own region (Sommerer and Liese 2024).

Figure 3 illustrates the strength of regionalisation across the 15 ENSURED case studies, showing where regional governance has come to play a prominent role, where it is moderate, and where it remains minimal across the policy areas of trade and inequality, climate and biodiversity, global health, migration and human rights, and digitalisation. Three key observations stand out. First, regionalisation has remained relatively weak in recent years. Most cases exhibit no meaningful regionalisation dynamic, with only five of the 15 ENSURED case studies scoring above zero. Where regional dynamics occur, they are generally moderate. Only AI governance demonstrates strong regional governance. This pattern contrasts with minilateralisation, which appears as a system-wide trend across policy areas. In the case of regionalisation, we observe a more selective and uneven dynamic rather than a broad shift in the architecture of global governance.

Second, regionalisation varies considerably across policy areas. Climate and global health governance display no regionalisation at all, possibly reflecting the functional requirements of these issues: addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and pandemics requires broad participation, limiting the advantages of shifting authority to RIOs. Trade exhibits only isolated regional components, such as in WTO reform, while broader efforts to incorporate developmental and environmental issues remain anchored within the WTO, and tax governance is firmly rooted in minilateralism. Human rights governance displays a stronger regional dimension. Regional courts and commissions, alongside regionally coordinated migration arrangements, contribute to more prominent regional governance, even though other areas, such as refugee protection, continue to rely primarily on multilateral institutions. Digitalisation stands out as the most regionalised policy area, driven by the CoE's AI governance treaty initiative.

Third, regionalisation varies within policy areas and follows distinct temporal trajectories. In trade governance, only the WTO reform case exhibits regionalisation; even here, the shift is gradual, moving away from multilateral negotiations toward regional arrangements, such as the EU-Mercosur trade agreement, which was recently signed in parallel with WTO negotiations. Migration and human rights governance shows moderate internal variation. Migration and gender governance increasingly rely on regional instruments and partnerships, including EU cooperation frameworks with third countries on migration, and regional gender treaties such as the Istanbul Convention, the Belém do Pará Convention, and the Maputo Protocol. Both cases indicate a gradual shift away from multilateral mechanisms. By contrast, reform debates within the UN Human Rights Council do not show a comparable regionalisation trend. Digitalisation displays the most pronounced differences. Cybersecurity remains primarily multilateral, anchored in established UN processes, while cryptocurrency governance continues to rely on minilateral standard-setters rather than RIOs. In contrast, AI governance has recently shifted decisively toward regionalism. Here, the absence of an existing universal forum prompted states to build regulatory capacity through the CoE, whose Framework Convention was designed to be globally accessible and to serve as a platform for eventual multilateralisation.
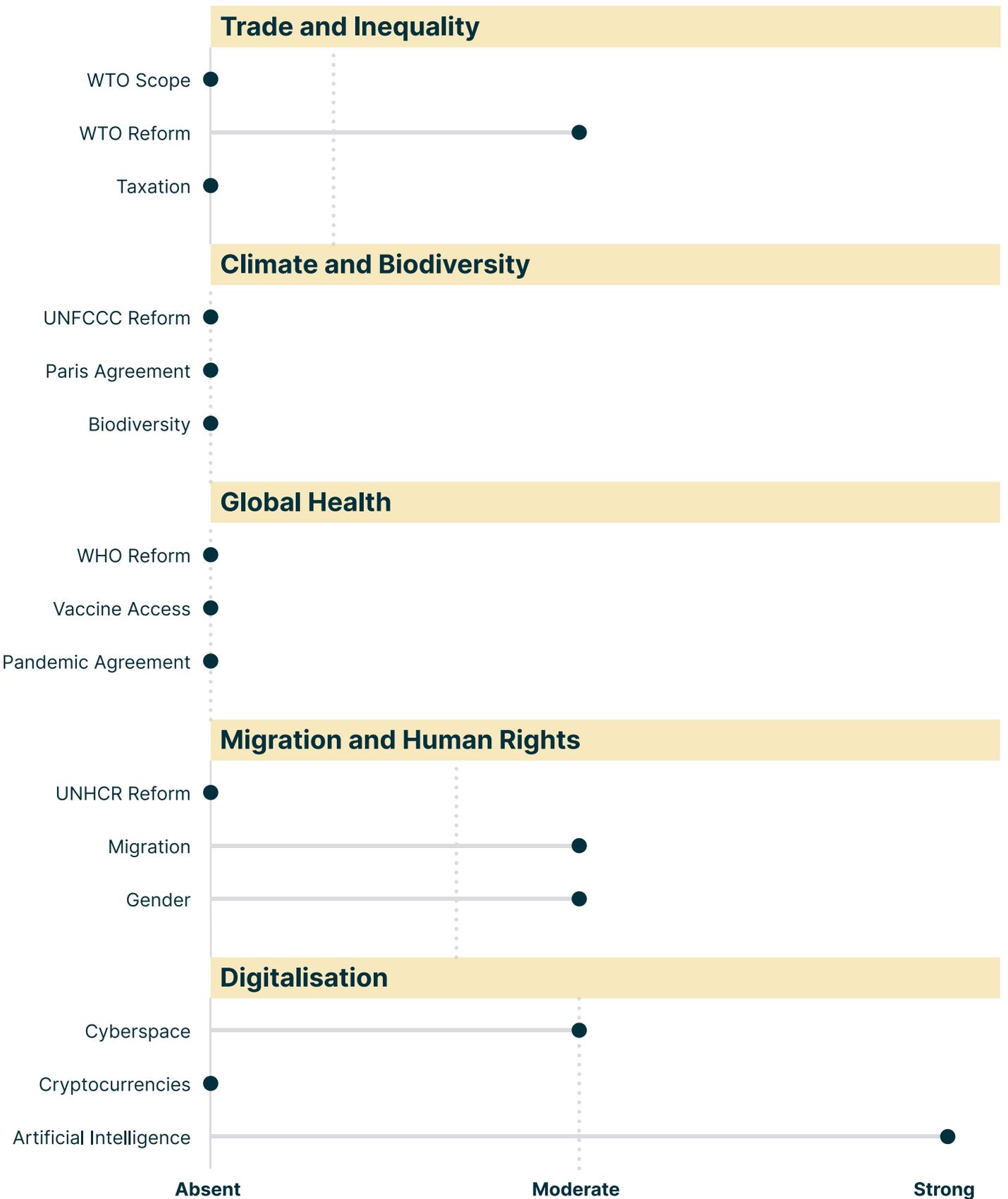
Dotted line marks the issue-area average.

These differences across issues and over time can, in part, be explained by the interaction between demand, created by the performance of multilateral institutions, and supply, provided by regional alternatives. On the demand side, states have stronger incentives to seek alternatives when multilateral forums fail to deliver results (Jupille et al. 2013). Conversely, when existing multilateral arrangements produce acceptable outcomes, there is little reason to seek alternative modes of governance. On the supply side, RIOs can offer viable alternatives when participating states exhibit sufficient political coherence. However, such coherence can no longer be assumed. The decline of liberal democracy and growing ideological heterogeneity worldwide have generated substantial ideological diversity within RIOs (Nord et al. 2025). Nearly all regional general-purpose organisations mentioned above face increasing variation among their members. The AU and the OAS include members ranging from closed autocracies to liberal democracies. The EU and the PIF, often seen as cohesive democratic organisations, include Hungary and Fiji, respectively – categorised as electoral autocracies – alongside liberal democracies. The LoAS and the SCO are more homogeneous but cluster entirely at the authoritarian end, suggesting convergence around sovereignty norms rather than shared governance ambitions (Debre and Sommerer 2025).

The ENSURED case studies illustrate how this dynamic between demand and supply shapes regionalisation across policy areas and over time. In policy areas where multilateral institutions remain comparatively effective, demand for regionalisation is low, and governance rarely shifts to RIOs. This pattern is visible in climate and global health governance, where multilateral institutions continue to function despite political tensions and implementation gaps. A different configuration emerges in human rights governance. Here, persistent polarisation and limited reform capacity within the UN Human Rights Council create incentives to explore alternatives to multilateral venues. Yet regionalisation remains constrained, as many RIOs struggle with growing political diversity, particularly in policy areas tied to liberal democratic norms, such as human rights. Similarly, migration and gender equality governance show some regionalisation, while core areas, such as refugee protection, remain anchored in global institutions. This reflects the fact that most regional organisations mirror the ideological diversity found at the multilateral level, limiting their ability to function as cohesive substitutes. By contrast, AI governance demonstrates a case in which weak multilateral capacity coincides with comparatively strong regional supply. In the absence of an effective multilateral process, states turned to the CoE as a legally credible and politically aligned forum to develop binding standards with global reach. These cases suggest that regionalisation is not a uniform response to multilateral failure, but a selective pathway shaped by the interaction between multilateral performance and the political capacity of regional organisations.

Overall, these developments suggest that, in recent years, regionalisation has primarily served as a substitute for states seeking more workable venues when multilateral negotiations stall. In almost all ENSURED case studies, regionalism complements existing multilateral structures. Yet the AI case illustrates that regionalisation can also be employed strategically to revive multilateral cooperation. Because no viable multilateral forum existed, the EU and like-minded states turned to the CoE, a cross-regional IO capable of generating ambitious, legally binding standards, to

negotiate a multilateral treaty open to all states. The CoE's treaty-making infrastructure, the relatively high alignment of its member states, and its strong reputation in negotiating globally influential instruments, such as the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, made it a uniquely suitable venue for this strategy. Working first within a like-minded regional setting allowed negotiators to build political consensus. Crucially, however, the resulting Framework Convention was designed with global ambition: it is open to accession by all interested states and aligns well with existing instruments, such as the OECD AI Principles and the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI. In this sense, the AI case demonstrates how RIOs can serve as effective starting points for multilateral governance.

The ENSURED expert survey provides additional insight into how regionalisation might evolve in the future (*Figure 4*). Average responses cluster around the midpoint of the scale, indicating moderate expectations regarding its future development by 2030. Rather than anticipating a strong shift toward regional governance, experts appear to expect incremental or selective expansion across policy areas.

Figure 4: How Likely is Regionalism to Grow by 2030?

Dotted line marks the scale midpoint.
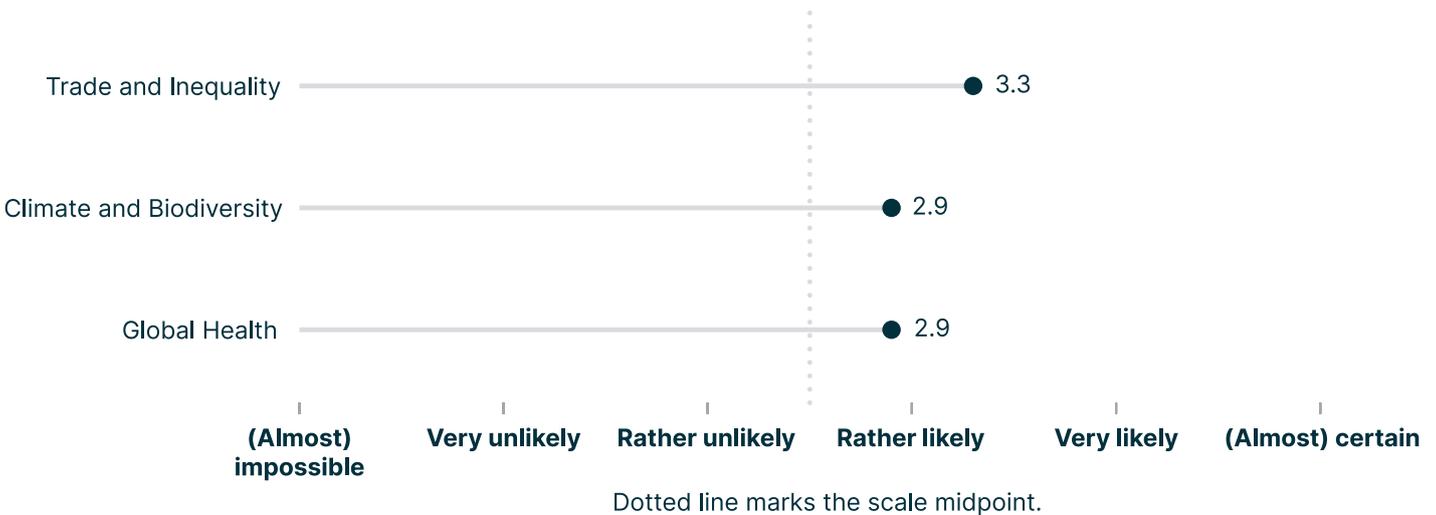
For trade and inequality governance, experts consider further regionalisation most likely, which aligns with ENSURED case studies showing how regional agreements have gained relevance as WTO reforms remain blocked. For climate and global health governance, experts place regionalisation only slightly above the midpoint, reflecting broad agreement that these policy areas will continue to be primarily shaped by multilateral institutions. This assessment is consistent with ENSURED case studies, which find no meaningful regionalisation in these policy areas.

Taken together, the survey results reinforce the central insights of the ENSURED case studies. Regionalisation is expected to remain a complementary pathway, emerging where political alignment, functional demands, and institutional capacity allow, but is unlikely to transform the overall architecture of global governance.

Counter-Institutionalisation of Global Governance

According to the conceptual framework developed for ENSURED, counter-institutionalisation describes a distinct pathway aimed at challenging established forms of international cooperation. The core idea is to create or utilise alternative international institutions to exert pressure on existing bodies that address the same or closely related issues (Choi et al. 2024). Conceptually, counter-institutionalisation is distinct from the other pathways discussed in this report because it is defined by competitive intent rather than institutional form (Faude and Parizek 2021). By contrast, minilateralism refers to a specific institutional form, characterised by informal cooperation among a small number of states, which may be cooperative or competitive in practice. Similarly, regionalism encompasses both cooperative and competitive dynamics but differs in institutional form, being defined by formal cooperation among geographically bounded groups of states driven by shared interests. Examples of such intentional competition include formal multilateral institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), often regarded as a China-led attempt to pressure the World Bank; informal minilaterals such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which competes with the multilateral UN framework on weapons of mass destruction; or the formal regional SCO, which seeks to counter Western influence in Central Asia (Morse and Keohane 2014). More recently, similar counter-institutional initiatives, such as the US effort to establish a Board of Peace in direct competition with the UN Security Council, have gained prominence in the West. In all these cases, dissatisfied states reallocate governance to alternative forums that provide greater control over participation, decision-making, and policy outcomes. ENSURED research highlights three important trade-offs of such counter-institutionalisation in terms of robustness, effectiveness, and democratic quality (Schmidtke and Hofmann 2025).

> **Counter-institutionalisation aims to create or utilise alternative international institutions to exert pressure on existing bodies that address the same or closely related issues.**

First, regarding robustness, counter-institutionalisation has ambivalent effects. On the one hand, competition from alternative arrangements may offer a way to work around blocked multilateral forums and may encourage adaptation within contested multilateral institutions, potentially increasing robustness (Alter and Meunier 2009). On the other hand, counter-institutionalisation can undermine robustness, as established institutions become challenged or ignored. When resources and political authority shift toward competing institutions, existing multilateral forums struggle to maintain their financial and organisational foundations.

Second, effectiveness can both benefit and suffer under counter-institutionalisation. Competing institutions allow decision-making and policy implementation to continue when established institutions are blocked. However, rules created by counter-institutions often compete with

established frameworks, undermining policy coherence and compliance by enabling actors to selectively choose the rules that best serve their interests (Busch 2007). While short-term output may improve, this can come at the cost of long-term outcomes and impact.

Finally, counter-institutionalisation also creates trade-offs for the democratic quality of global governance. Competing institutions can enhance participation by giving a voice to actors marginalised within established bodies, such as states and civil society organisations from the Global South. However, institutional competition may also weaken democratic participation and accountability by dispersing decision-making across multiple forums, making it harder – particularly for less powerful actors – to engage fully with all relevant processes and to trace responsibility.
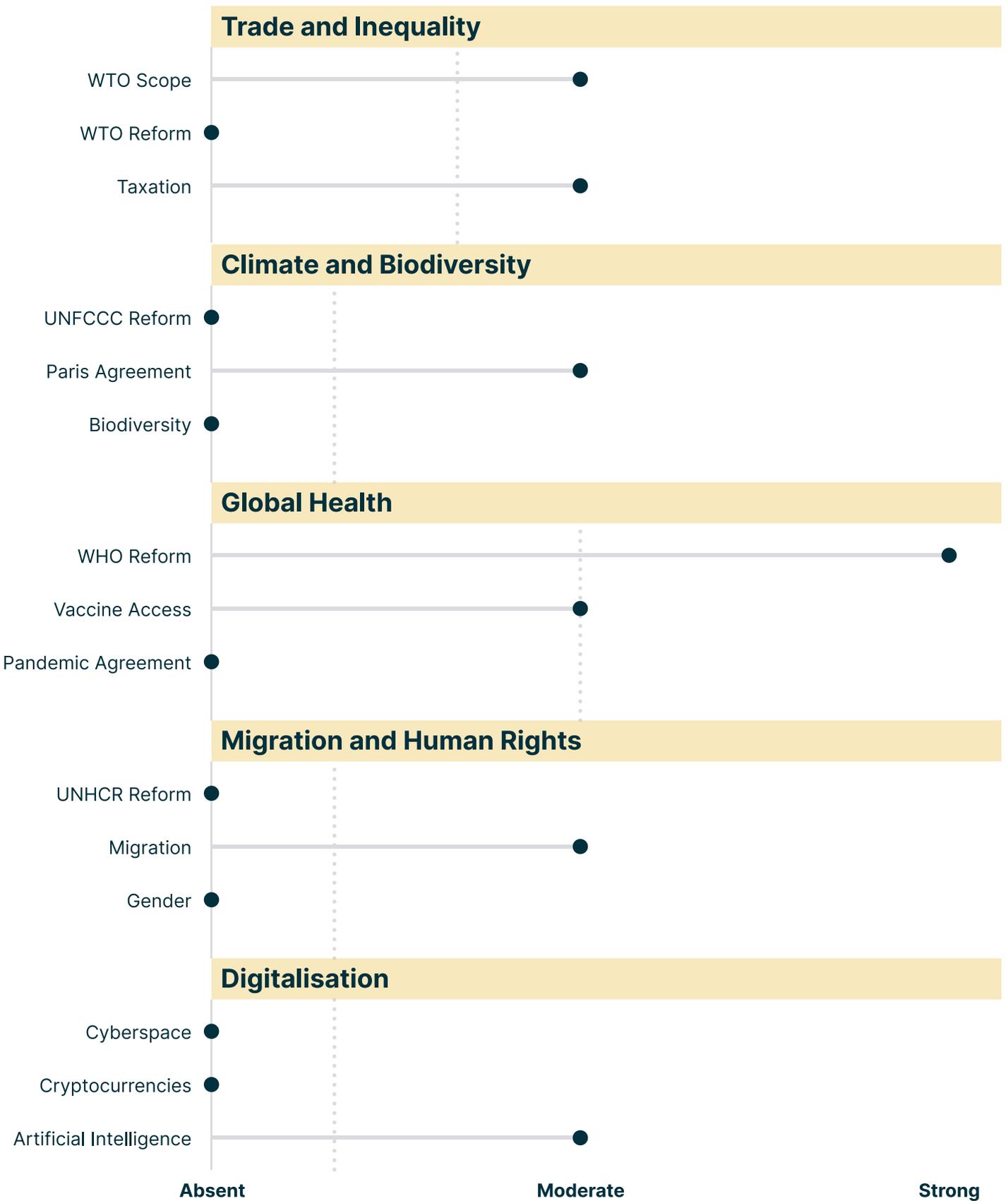
Figure 5 illustrates the strength of counter-institutionalisation across the 15 ENSURED case studies. Overall, counter-institutionalisation is neither absent nor a systemic alternative pathway to multilateralism. Instead, it appears in almost half of the cases, usually at a moderate level, and only reaches a high level in the context of ongoing WHO reform initiatives. This positions counter-institutionalisation between the other two pathways identified by ENSURED. Unlike minilateralisation, which is prominent across all analysed policy areas, counter-institutionalisation is more selective, yet it is used more regularly than regionalisation.

Counter-institutionalisation is neither absent nor a systemic alternative pathway to multilateralism.

Differences across policy areas reinforce this interpretation. Counter-institutionalisation is most evident in global health and trade governance, where two out of three case studies describe moderate-to-strong attempts by groups of states to establish competing institutions or shift decision-making to competing venues. Health stands out as the only policy area exhibiting strong counter-institutionalisation. Trade exhibits moderate forms, particularly in the context of WTO scope expansion and tax governance. By contrast, climate, human rights, and digitalisation governance show considerably weaker efforts to challenge established forums, with only one in three cases registering moderate counter-institutional dynamics. These differences suggest that counter-institutionalisation is not a general response to dissatisfaction with multilateral governance, but rather a targeted, issue-specific reaction.

Temporal dynamics within policy areas help to further specify how counter-institutionalisation evolves once institutional competition emerges. Across the ENSURED case studies, two dominant temporal patterns stand out. In some cases, institutional competition becomes an enduring feature of governance. In this scenario, venues continue to compete, and no single institution emerges as the core governance provider. In the second scenario, competition diminishes over time. Following an initial phase of contestation, governance reconverges around a single forum.

Figure 5: Counter-Institutionalisation Across ENSURED Case Studies

Trade and Inequality

WTO Scope — Moderate

WTO Reform — Absent

Taxation — Moderate

Climate and Biodiversity

UNFCCC Reform — Absent

Paris Agreement — Moderate

Biodiversity — Absent

Global Health

WHO Reform — Strong

Vaccine Access — Moderate

Pandemic Agreement — Absent

Migration and Human Rights

UNHCR Reform — Absent

Migration — Moderate

Gender — Absent

Digitalisation

Cyberspace — Absent

Cryptocurrencies — Absent

Artificial Intelligence — Moderate

Absent   Moderate   Strong

Dotted line marks the issue-area average.

In the first, more common trajectory, counter-institutionalisation does result in continuous rivalry, with multiple institutions claiming authority over the same issue. Trade governance offers a clear example. The WTO – although considerably weakened – remains the central multilateral forum for global trade rules, yet it faces substantial competition from a dense web of minilateral and regional trade agreements, which allow subsets of states to advance their preferred regulations. Similar dynamics are evident in trade-related policy areas such as intellectual property and taxation, where governance occurs across the WTO, the UN, and several smaller venues. Global health governance exhibits a similar form of enduring competition. The WHO continues to play a central role, but a growing share of resources and implementation capacity is held by parallel organisations such as Gavi, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and the World Bank. None of these venues replaces the WHO, but together they create a complex web of governance actors. Migration governance follows the same pattern. Universal agreements under the UN's framework remain in place, yet key states and the EU have begun organising cooperation through competing regional and minilateral arrangements. Across these cases, competition among multiple actors has become a persistent feature of governance, offering states the opportunity to select venues according to where they expect the most favourable bargain.

The second trajectory is less common, featuring declining competition and the reconsolidation of a clearly recognisable centre of governance. Here, initial dissatisfaction with established venues declines over time, or states lose confidence in their newly created alternatives, leading to the re-establishment of a central forum. AI governance provides a clear example. Early efforts to establish standards governing the use of AI were fragmented across multiple IOs, including the UN and the OECD, and relied on non-binding recommendations. This fragmentation prompted a coalition of powerful states to develop a more integrated formal treaty, using the CoE as a suitable forum. As noted above, this initiative was not intended to escalate competition among multiple international agreements but to establish a central multilateral framework around which broader coordination could develop.

States are more likely to seek alternative forums when multilateral decision-making rules or distributional outcomes are perceived as unfair.

Elements of this re-centring dynamic are also visible in parts of tax governance, where earlier fragmentation has gradually been channelled into more centralised multilateral processes under the UN. In contrast to the first trajectory, these cases show that counter-institutionalisation can be temporary: competition acts as a catalyst for institutional adjustment, after which authority reconverges rather than remaining permanently dispersed.

Two conditions help explain these differences across policy areas and over time. The first is concrete dissatisfaction with established governance venues. States are more likely to seek alternative forums when multilateral decision-making rules or distributional outcomes are perceived as unfair – for example, through restrictive intellectual property rules, limited access to vaccines, constrained fiscal autonomy, or reduced control over migration policy (Raustiala and Victor 2004). The second condition for counter-institutionalisation is the capacity to act on dissatisfaction by

mobilising or building alternative venues capable of credibly challenging the centrality of established arrangements. Many states may be unhappy with existing multilateral institutions, but only some have the financial and political resources to mount a counter-institutional initiative (Pratt 2021).

Several ENSURED case studies illustrate this dynamic. Global health governance is the clearest example. For several decades, major donor states and philanthropic funders have established multiple initiatives alongside the WHO, including Gavi and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). These initiatives compete with the WHO for agenda-setting and funding, shifting authority toward more targeted, donor-controlled arrangements. Subsequent reform debates, including those triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, have continued this pattern, as initiatives such as COVAX deliver finance through parallel institutions rather than concentrating it at the WHO.

Migration governance follows a similar trajectory. The Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees structure multilateral cooperation around voluntary protection standards. Yet over the past decade, a coalition of wealthy destination countries, including Australia, the EU, and the UK, has grown dissatisfied with the Compacts' capacity to deliver effective migration control and domestic enforcement. Consequently, they have begun reallocating core governance functions to competing regional arrangements. EU-led migration partnerships with third countries, such as recent agreements with Egypt and Lebanon, prioritise containment and externalised processing. Even more explicitly, Australia's offshore processing arrangements with Nauru and Papua New Guinea compete with multilateral standards by addressing similar migration challenges through an alternative set of governance principles. While the Global Compacts institutionalise a rights-based, cooperative approach, these competing arrangements focus on restricting movement and externalising control.

Counter-institutionalisation is a response to dissatisfaction with established multilateral institutions and requires the ability to redirect resources and political authority to alternative venues.
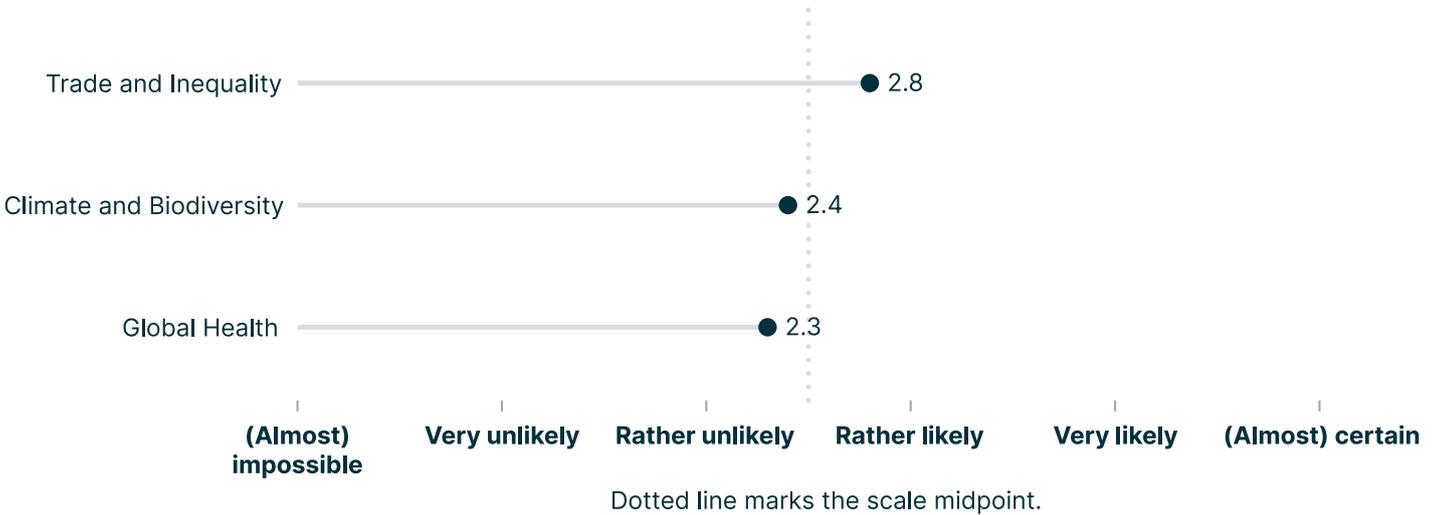
In tax governance, a coalition of Global South states has become increasingly dissatisfied with the exclusive nature of G20/OECD-based corporate taxation governance and its distributional outcomes. Turning to the UN, where voting rules and numerical strength provide greater political influence, this coalition has led a competing process aimed at reallocating the right to tax corporate income to the source of economic activity. The resulting Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation seeks to shift corporate income taxation away from residence-based principles, directly opposing the interests of capital-exporting countries in the Global North.

Taken together, the ENSURED case studies show that counter-institutionalisation is a response to dissatisfaction with established multilateral institutions and requires the ability to redirect resources and political authority to alternative venues. Where powerful actors can sustain such competing institutions – for example, donors in global health or destination countries in migration – contestation between institutions tends to become a lasting feature of governance. In other policy areas,

including taxation and digitalisation, counter-institutionalisation can even have a multilateralising effect: temporary competition generates pressure for global coordination, contributing to the emergence or consolidation of multilateral solutions rather than their fragmentation.

Figure 6: How Likely is Counter-Institutionalisation to Grow by 2030?

	Score
Trade and Inequality	● 2.8
Climate and Biodiversity	● 2.4
Global Health	● 2.3

(Almost) impossible — Very unlikely — Rather unlikely — Rather likely — Very likely — (Almost) certain

Dotted line marks the scale midpoint.

The ENSURED expert survey reveals a notable gap between expectations and observed dynamics (*Figure 6*). Across policy areas, experts consistently rate counter-institutionalisation as less likely than minilateralisation or regionalisation. This contrasts with the ENSURED case studies, which identify stronger counter-institutionalisation processes than regionalisation, pointing to substantial uncertainty about how these dynamics will evolve. Furthermore, *Figure 6* highlights discrepancies between the counter-institutionalisation observed in the ENSURED case studies and the future expectations of experts. While experts view counter-institutionalisation as relatively unlikely in global health governance, the case studies document the highest levels of counter-institutionalisation in this policy area. Conversely, experts anticipate more counter-institutionalisation in climate and biodiversity governance than the empirical evidence currently suggests.

Managing the Variable Geometry of Global Governance

The 15 ENSURED case studies provide a comprehensive picture of how global governance is being reorganised across the policy areas of trade and inequality, climate and biodiversity, global health, migration and human rights, and digitalisation. This section summarises and discusses key findings, comparing how minilateralisation, regionalisation, and counter-institutionalisation shape contemporary global governance. We first provide a descriptive overview and then consider what these configurations imply for the theory and practice of global governance.

Figure 7 visualises how different pathways of global governance change interact across policy areas. For each case study, the figure indicates whether minilateral, regional, and counter-institutional dynamics are absent, moderate, or strong, and whether governance has remained anchored in, or returned to, multilateralism. Rather than assuming a linear shift away from multilateralism, *Figure 7* depicts a more dynamic landscape in which several pathways interact in distinct ways. In some cases, these pathways reinforce, rather than replace, multilateral institutions.
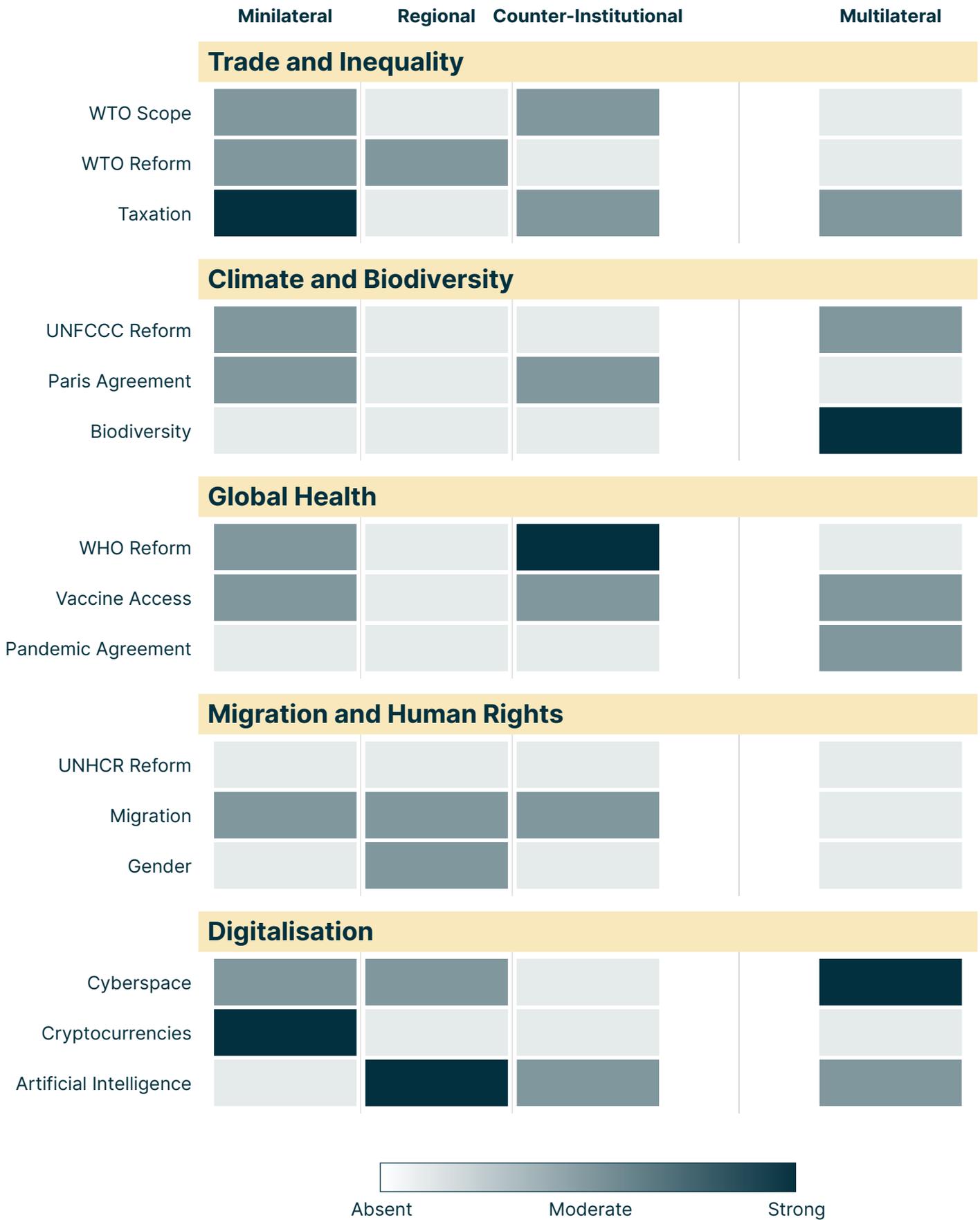
Figure 7 shows that minilateralisation, regionalisation, counter-institutionalisation, and occasional multilateralisation combine in three distinct patterns that capture the dominant reconfigurations currently transforming global governance. The first pattern is characterised by a strong multilateral core and marginal fragmentation, closely resembling traditional conceptions of international cooperation through a single multilateral IO. In this configuration, multilateral institutions provide the primary governance functions, while minilateral and regional alternatives, where they exist, interact with the multilateral core in a supportive and complementary way rather than challenging it.

> Minilateralisation, regionalisation, counter-institutionalisation, and occasionally multilateralisation combine in three distinct patterns.

Among the ENSURED policy areas, climate governance is the only one to exhibit this configuration. Across the case studies on UNFCCC reform, the Paris Agreement, and biodiversity governance, multilateral institutions remain the uncontested centre of governance. Minilateral initiatives occasionally appear, but they play a supporting rather than a fragmenting role. Regionalisation and counter-institutionalisation are largely absent.

Figure 7: Pathways of Global Governance Change Across ENSURED Case Studies

	Minilateral	Regional	Counter-Institutional	Multilateral
Trade and Inequality				
WTO Scope	Moderate	Absent	Moderate	Absent
WTO Reform	Moderate	Moderate	Absent	Absent
Taxation	Strong	Absent	Moderate	Moderate
Climate and Biodiversity				
UNFCCC Reform	Moderate	Absent	Absent	Moderate
Paris Agreement	Moderate	Absent	Moderate	Absent
Biodiversity	Absent	Absent	Absent	Strong
Global Health				
WHO Reform	Moderate	Absent	Strong	Absent
Vaccine Access	Moderate	Absent	Moderate	Moderate
Pandemic Agreement	Absent	Absent	Absent	Moderate
Migration and Human Rights				
UNHCR Reform	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent
Migration	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Absent
Gender	Absent	Moderate	Absent	Absent
Digitalisation				
Cyberspace	Moderate	Moderate	Absent	Strong
Cryptocurrencies	Strong	Absent	Absent	Absent
Artificial Intelligence	Absent	Strong	Moderate	Moderate

Absent   Moderate   Strong

The second pattern is layered multilateralism under pressure, in which multilateral institutions remain central but do not control all governance functions, as alternative forums play substantive roles alongside them. In this configuration, alternative institutional forms assume specific governance functions, such as financing and implementation, without replacing multilateral institutions. Health and human rights governance exemplify this configuration. In health governance, multilateral IOs continue to lead international negotiations, while minilateral and counter-institutional dynamics emerge around financing and implementation. WHO reform represents the strongest example of counter-institutionalisation among all case studies. However, this competition unfolds alongside renewed efforts to strengthen multilateral cooperation, including the recent Pandemic Agreement. Human rights governance displays a comparable logic, but with a stronger regionalisation dimension. Multilateral institutions continue to provide standards, while regional arrangements contribute selectively. In both policy areas, alternative institutions supplement rather than replace multilateral institutions, producing a differentiated but still recognisably multilateral governance landscape.

The third pattern is characterised by high fragmentation and institutional competition. In this configuration, multiple institutions vie for authority over agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy implementation. Trade and inequality, as well as digitalisation governance, fall into this category. In the trade and inequality policy area, all cases exhibit significant minilateral activity, complemented by moderate counter-institutionalisation. The WTO remains a central actor, but governance overall is organised through multiple overlapping venues rather than a single multilateral IO. Regionalisation adds to this fragmentation. Digitalisation exhibits the greatest internal variation. Cryptocurrency governance relies on minilateral arrangements; cybersecurity combines minilateral and regional elements; and AI governance stands out for its strong regional approach, which ultimately facilitates multilateralisation. Across these cases, all three pathways interact within the same policy area, producing a highly fragmented governance landscape.

When multilateral institutions deliver acceptable results, states invest in them; when they fail, states turn to other arrangements.

Conceptually, these findings suggest that no single understanding of multilateralism adequately captures contemporary global governance. In the scholarly literature, multilateralism has been interpreted in at least three distinct ways, each highlighting different aspects of how cooperation is organised. From a functional perspective, multilateralism is often seen as a tool for efficiently managing cooperation problems. Institutions are valued for their ability to reduce transaction costs and stabilise expectations (Keohane 1990; Martin 1992). From this perspective, the observed patterns reflect rational adaptation: when multilateral institutions deliver acceptable results, states invest in them; when they fail, states turn to minilateral or regional arrangements, or deploy counter-institutions. The coexistence of multilateral institutions with alternative arrangements does not contradict this logic, as it may simply reflect cost-benefit calculations about which format best addresses a given cooperation problem at a specific point in time.

However, the ENSURED case studies also suggest limits to this functional view. In several policy areas – particularly climate governance – states continue to rely on multilateral institutions despite limited performance. In these cases, multilateralism appears to be valued not only for its functional benefits but also for its institutional qualities, such as inclusiveness, fairness, and shared ownership. These cases align more closely with conceptions of multilateralism, in which legitimacy and principled cooperation matter independently of short-term effectiveness (Ruggie 1992; Woods 2023).

Finally, a practice perspective helps make sense of the complex and evolving arrangements documented by ENSURED. From this viewpoint, multilateralism is less a fixed institutional form and more an ongoing process of managing interdependence through dialogue, negotiation, and repeated interaction across multiple venues (Pouliot 2016; Meyer et al. 2021). The coexistence of different institutional forms and governance modes reflects how actors navigate cooperation amid uncertainty and shifting power relations.

Taken together, global governance can best be described as a governance system of variable geometry. Across all five policy areas, different institutional forms – multilateralism, minilateralism, and regionalism – interact within the same policy area and are employed through varying modes of governance, ranging from integrative, community-oriented problem-solving, to more transactional and competitive counter-institutionalisation. Crucially, these constellations change over time in response to shifts in state preferences, the nature of policy problems, and the availability of suitable alternative institutions (Jupille et al. 2013). When multilateral institutions perform adequately, states tend to reinforce them, as in climate governance. When they fail, actors turn to minilateral or regional institutions, often accompanied by competitive strategies of institutional contestation, as observed in trade, digitalisation, and parts of global health governance. In some cases, authority even reconverges around multilateral frameworks.

For policymakers, the more complex, fragile, and fluid nature of global governance implies that institutional diversity has become a persistent feature and is unlikely to go away. High-quality governance therefore requires constant attention and strategic management. In a system of variable geometry, safeguarding robust, effective, and democratically legitimate governance depends on continuous engagement, careful institutional design, and deliberate choices about when to compete and when to reconsolidate authority. At the same time, the variable geometry of global governance also creates opportunities to support multilateralism. Several ENSURED case studies illustrate strategies in which minilateral or regional arrangements are used to bolster, rather than undermine, multilateralism. In global tax governance, shifting negotiations to a universal UN framework helped address legitimacy concerns that smaller clubs could not resolve alone. In AI governance, a regional organisation served as an incubator for rules designed for global adoption. These cases demonstrate that alternative institutional forms can function as stepping stones rather than substitutes for multilateral cooperation.

The more complex, fragile, and fluid nature of global governance implies that institutional diversity has become a persistent feature and is unlikely to go away.

Conclusion

In a rapidly changing world, global governance is under pressure from many directions. Rivalry among major powers and political contestation within established democracies make progress in traditional multilateral institutions harder to reach (Choi et al. 2024; Hale et al. 2013). At the same time, the demand for international cooperation remains high, as governments cannot address the most pressing global challenges alone. Climate change, pandemics, the digital transformation, and mass displacement all require deep cooperation beyond national borders.

Against this backdrop, this report brings together evidence from 15 ENSURED case studies and the ENSURED expert survey to track how global governance in key policy areas – trade and inequality, climate and biodiversity, global health, migration and human rights, and digitalisation – is adapting to mounting pressures. At which moments do states turn to informal small-group cooperation? When does international decision-making shift toward regional IOs? Under what conditions does competition among institutions increase? By tracing the three pathways of minilateralisation, regionalisation, and counter-institutionalisation across five central policy areas, the report reveals a systematic reconfiguration of global governance that has critical implications for the theory and practice of global governance.

ENSURED research shows that global governance today operates through variable geometry. Across the five policy areas, multilateral institutions frequently interact with, and at times compete against, minilateral initiatives and regional organisations. The specific configuration of institutional formats and modes of global governance varies by policy area and evolves continuously over time. Three recurring configurations stand out.

The first configuration features a strong multilateral core with little fragmentation. Climate governance exemplifies this pattern: the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement remain the uncontested centres of cooperation, while minilateral initiatives occur sporadically and mainly support implementation rather than undermining the multilateral framework. Regional organisations and counter-institutions play only marginal roles. In this area, variable geometry exists, but it remains tightly bound.

The second configuration combines a weakened multilateral core with moderate fragmentation. Global health and human rights governance fit this pattern. In both areas, multilateral institutions continue to set standards and convene negotiations, but they do not control all key governance functions.

The third configuration is marked by high fragmentation and institutional competition. Trade and digitalisation governance fall into this category. Multilateral trade rules remain relevant, but cooperation increasingly unfolds through a dense web of plurilateral and regional arrangements. Digitalisation governance exhibits even greater fragmentation: cryptocurrency governance relies heavily on minilateral cooperation, cybersecurity combines minilateral and regional approaches, and AI governance has recently seen strong regional leadership.

These patterns have direct implications for how we conceptualise multilateral cooperation today. A single conceptual lens can no longer capture the dynamics of multilateralism. Contemporary global governance operates at the intersection of efficiency, legitimacy, and day-to-day practices. Cooperation sometimes follows a largely functional logic: states invest in multilateral institutions when they manage problems at an acceptable cost and turn elsewhere when these institutions stall or underperform. From this angle, the rise of minilateral and regional arrangements appears as pragmatic adaptation. Yet there are limits to this view. In areas such as climate and biodiversity, governments continue to rely on multilateral institutions even when outcomes fall short of expectations, because these institutions provide inclusiveness, shared ownership, and a sense of collective responsibility that alternative formats cannot easily replicate. Finally, many arrangements are best understood as the outcome of continuous practice rather than deliberate institutional choice. Cooperation unfolds through repeated interactions across multiple venues, shaped by uncertainty and shifting power relations.

> A single conceptual lens can no longer capture the dynamics of multilateralism.

For policymakers, this variable geometry presents both challenges and opportunities for strengthening global governance and making it more robust, effective, and democratic. Regarding robustness, the primary challenge is stability. With authority distributed across multiple institutions and forums, cooperation becomes harder to establish and more vulnerable to political shocks. Commitments may be redefined or weakened as actors shift between venues, and coordination increasingly relies on informal alignments rather than formal rules. Yet this dispersion also offers an opportunity: if cooperation falters in one forum, others can step in to fill the gap. Governance no longer depends on the success or failure of a single institution, which can prevent complete breakdowns and sustain collaborative efforts even in contentious situations.

The key challenge for effectiveness lies in control. As decision-making occurs simultaneously across various venues, with overlapping timelines, decisions made in one context can hinder progress in another. Planning therefore becomes provisional, and coordination demands more attention, time, and administrative resources than in centralised systems. Yet complexity also presents opportunities. Different governance formats can be tailored to specific tasks. Minilateral forums respond quickly when speed is essential, regional arrangements address shared contexts, and multilateral institutions offer scale and coordination. Careful planning and management allow actors to exploit these comparative advantages, enabling flexible and effective problem-solving.

Democratic legitimacy follows a similar logic. Fragmentation poses risks, as decision-making may shift to smaller, less transparent forums, weakening accountability and limiting public oversight. Yet variable geometry can also enhance participation. New institutions, regional organisations, and issue-specific coalitions can give previously marginalised actors a greater voice, helping to break long-standing path dependencies.

These trade-offs indicate that the central challenge in contemporary global governance is not to restrict institutional diversity, but to manage it strategically. From a bird's-eye perspective, the variable geometry of today's arrangements complicates global governance, making it harder to direct, but simultaneously allowing greater adaptability for multiple actors. For policymakers, maintaining cooperation in this context requires continuous attention to institutional relationships, a clear grasp of how different arrangements interact, and a thoughtful balancing of comparative institutional advantages.

References

Alter, Karen J., and Sophie Meunier. 2009. "The Politics of International Regime Complexity." *Perspectives on Politics* 7 (1): 13-24. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592709090033.

Börzel, Tanja, and Thomas Risse. 2016. *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism*. Oxford University Press.

Boukal, Tomáš, Petr Janský, Miroslav Palanský, and Michal Parízek. 2025. "Reforming Global Tax Governance: OECD and UN Paths to Effective and Participatory Tax Reform." *ENSURED Research Report* 16 (November): 1-34. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Bursi, Matteo, and Ettore Greco. 2025. "The Shifting Sands of Cryptocurrency Regulation: A Path Towards Global Cooperation." *ENSURED Research Report* 14 (September): 1-33. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Busch, Marc L. 2007. "Overlapping Institutions, Forum Shopping, and Dispute Settlement in International Trade." *International Organization* 61 (4): 735-61. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818307070257.

Carney, Mark. 2026. "Special Address." World Economic Forum, January 20. https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/.

Choi, Ha Eun, Hylke Dijkstra, Andrea Liese, Thomas Sommerer, and Clara Weinhardt. 2024. "EU Support for Robust, Effective, and Democratic Global Governance: A Conceptual Framework." *ENSURED Research Report* 4 (July): 1-44. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Choi, Ha Eun, and Andrea Liese. 2025. "The Global Governance of Sex and Gender: Women's and LGBTQI+ Rights Amid Regress, Reform and Resilience." *ENSURED Research Report* 19 (December): 1-39. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Debre, Maria J., and Thomas Sommerer. 2025. "Are Non-Democracies Taking over? Autocratization and International Organization Membership." *Cooperation and Conflict* (August): 1-27. https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367251364170.

Faude, Benjamin, and Kenneth W. Abbott. 2025. "Does the System Work? Transnational Crises and the Resilience of Global Governance." *International Studies Review* 27 (4): 1-28. https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaf020.

Faude, Benjamin, and Michal Parizek. 2021. "Contested Multilateralism as Credible Signaling: How Strategic Inconsistency Can Induce Cooperation among States." *The Review of International Organizations* 16 (1): 843-70. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-020-09398-7.

Fernández, Óscar, and Mirko Heinzel. 2025a. "The Intellectual Property and Public Health Regime Complex: Considerations on Vaccine Access and Equity." *ENSURED Research Report* 8 (May): 1-38. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Fernández, Óscar, and Mirko Heinzel. 2025b. "The WHO Pandemic Agreement: Bolstering Global Health Security Against Political Headwinds." *ENSURED Research Report* 12 (September): 1-37. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Fernández, Óscar, and Mirko Heinzel. 2025c. "Reforming the World Health Organization After the COVID-19 Pandemic: Diagnosis and Prognosis." *ENSURED Research Report* 18 (November): 1-39. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Haftel, Yoram Z., and Stephanie C. Hofmann. 2025. "Under Cover: Substituting Formal IOs during Hard Times." *Ethics & International Affairs* 39 (2): 130-44. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679425100117.

Hale, Thomas, David Held, and Kevin Young. 2013. *Gridlock: Why Global Cooperation Is Failing When We Need It Most*. Polity Press.

Hoxtell, Wade. 2025. "Global AI Regulation at a Time of Transformation: The Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence." *ENSURED Research Report* 20 (November): 1-37. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Jupille, Joseph, Walter Mattli, and Duncan Snidal. 2013. *Institutional Choice and Global Commerce*. Cambridge University Press.

Keohane, Robert O. 1990. "Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research." *International Journal* 45 (4): 731-64. https://doi.org/10.1177/002070209004500401.

King, Samuel, and Inés M. Pousadela. 2025. "The UN Human Rights Council: Challenges and Opportunities for Reform." *ENSURED Research Report* 9 (May): 1-37. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Kustova, Irina, Christian Dietz, Renske Van Hoof, and Jan Karlas. 2025. "The Paris Agreement Turns 10: Is It (Still) Delivering on Its Promises?" *ENSURED Research Report* 11 (September): 1-51. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Lake, David A., Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse. 2021. "Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization." *International Organization* 75 (2): 225-57. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000636.

Marconi, Federica, and Ettore Greco. 2025. "Regulating Cyberspace: UN Consensus-Building in a Fragmented Digital World." *ENSURED Research Report* 10 (May): 1-34. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Martin, Lisa L. 1992. "Interests, Power, and Multilateralism." *International Organization* 46 (4): 765-92. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300033245.

Meyer, Thomas, José Luís de Sales Marques, and Mario Telò, eds. 2021. *Towards a New Multilateralism: Cultural Divergence and Political Convergence?* Routledge.

Morse, Julia, and Robert O. Keohane. 2014. "Contested Multilateralism." *The Review of International Organizations* 9 (4): 385-412. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-014-9188-2.

Naím, Moisés. 2009. "Minilateralism." *Foreign Policy* 193 (July/August): 135-36.

Nord, Marina, Fabio Angiolillo, Ana Good God, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2025. "State of the World 2024: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?" *Democratization* 32 (4): 839-64. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2487825.

Parizek, Michal, and Clara Weinhardt. 2025. "Revitalising and Reforming the World Trade Organization in an Age of Geopolitics." *ENSURED Research Report* 6 (May): 1-32. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Peerboom, Felix, Evangelia (Lilian) Tsourdi, and Kai Michael Kenkel. 2025. "Transforming Global Migration Governance Through and Beyond the Global Compacts." *ENSURED Research Report* 13 (August): 1-43. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Petri, Franziska, and Jan Karlas. 2025. "Climate Negotiations Under Scrutiny: Is UNFCCC Decision-Making up to the Challenge?" *ENSURED Research Report* 7 (May): 1-39. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Petri, Franziska, Jayati Srivastava, Edith Drieskens, and Noa Lameire. 2025. "Moving Global Biodiversity Governance Forward: How to Strengthen the CBD." *ENSURED Research Report* 17 (November): 1-39. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Pouliot, Vincent. 2016. *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy*. Cambridge University Press.

Pratt, Tyler. 2021. "Angling for Influence: Institutional Proliferation in Development Banking." *International Studies Quarterly* 65 (1): 95-108. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa085.

Raustiala, Kal, and David G. Victor. 2004. "The Regime Complex for Plant Genetic Resources." *International Organization* 58 (2): 277-309. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818304582036.

Ruggie, John G. 1992. "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution." *International Organization* 46 (3): 561-98. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027831.

Schmidtke, Henning, and Stephanie C. Hofmann. 2025. "Governing in Complexity: Assessing the Quality of Global Governance Across 15 Case Studies." *ENSURED Research Report* 25 (January): 1-31. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu/.

Sommerer, Thomas, and Andrea Liese. 2024. "Can International Institutions Still Deliver? Patterns and Sources of Effectiveness and Democracy in Global Governance." *ENSURED Research Report* 1 (April): 1-48. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Verhaegen, Soetkin, Hylke Dijkstra, and Thomas Sommerer. 2025. "Robust, Effective, and Democratic Global Governance for a World in Transition: Evidence From the ENSURED Expert Survey." *ENSURED Research Report* 23 (December): 1-39. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu

Weinhardt, Clara, and Hylke Dijkstra. 2024. "Fork or Bump in the Road? The Crisis of the Rules-Based Global Order and the Robustness of International Institutions." *ENSURED Research Report* 2 (April): 1-30. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Weinhardt, Clara, Michal Parizek, and Jayati Srivastava. 2025. "Expanding the WTO's Scope in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape: An Appraisal of Development, Environment, and Inclusiveness Agendas." *ENSURED Research Report* 15 (September): 1-38. https://www.ensuredeurope.eu.

Woods, Ngaire. 2023. "Multilateralism in the Twenty-First Century." *Global Perspectives* 4 (1): 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2023.68310.

About ENSURED

In an era marked by global challenges, international cooperation is more essential than ever. Yet multilateral initiatives too often end in gridlock, as dominant states seek to bend the global order to their own interests. Enter ENSURED, a Horizon Europe-funded research consortium studying how the EU and its member states can better defend multilateralism and make global governance more robust, effective, and democratic.

ENSURED focuses on key policy domains that by their very nature pose complex transnational challenges. Our research assesses the state of play in these different areas and investigates the EU's strengths and weaknesses as an actor working to defend and transform multilateralism. Embracing the ethos of multilateral cooperation, the ENSURED consortium comprises universities, think tanks, and civil society groups from across Europe, Brazil, India, South Africa, China, and the United States. We aim to equip policymakers in the EU with evidence-based insights, actionable recommendations, and practical tools to promote better global governance for a world in transition.

ENSURED publications are available via the project website: https://www.ensuredeurope.eu/

**Funded by
the European Union**

Editorial coordination: Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi)

Reinhardtstr. 7
10117 Berlin
Germany
ensured@gppi.net