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Structural conditions for working-time reduction as an eco-social policy: stakeholder assessments across European welfare regimes

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ABSTRACT

Working-time reduction (WTR) has reemerged as a prominent eco-social policy proposal in debates on how to enable 1.5 °C-compatible lifestyles. While a growing literature documents its potential benefits for well-being and sustainability, less is known about the political conditions under which WTR becomes acceptable and implementable across different welfare regimes and positions in the global political economy. This article examines how stakeholder acceptance of WTR is assembled, contested, and constrained in practice, and what this implies for its political feasibility as an eco-social transition policy. Drawing on a hybrid Policy Delphi and Stakeholder Thinking Lab conducted in Sweden, Germany, and Latvia, we analyze how stakeholders embedded in distinct welfare-state and work-regime formations reason about WTR's desirability, feasibility, and political possibility. The findings show widespread support for WTR on well-being grounds, but highly conditional acceptance when assessed as an ecological and political intervention. Perceived political feasibility depends on income security, labor-market institutions, coordination capacity, and countries' positions within European and global core-periphery relations. Where welfare institutions buffer individuals from labor-market risks, WTR becomes a negotiable reform; where working time functions as a survival imperative, it remains politically fragile. We argue that WTR operates as a diagnostic "stress test," revealing where societies can translate support for well-being into coordinated redistribution of time and where the social and institutional preconditions are missing. WTR debates in Europe are not only nationally differentiated but also globally situated, exposing the temporal and political-economic constraints that condition Europe's 1.5 °C transition strategies.

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Working-time reduction; eco-social policy; welfare regimes; work regime; stakeholder acceptance; core-periphery relations

Introduction

The term "capitalocene" locates the origin of today's environmental crises not in humanity as such, but in specific relations of power, production, and nature that define our institutionalized social and economic order (Moore 2015), a speeding "treadmill of production and consumption" that must continually grow to stabilize itself (Schnaiberg 1980). Central to this dynamic is the organization of society around "abstract labor time," a form of temporal mediation in which human activity becomes socially valid only insofar as it conforms to the imperatives of value production (Postone 1993; Bonefeld 2010). Any possibility of achieving "1.5 °C lifestyles" (Fuchs et al. 2026; Kreinin et al. 2024; Laksevics et al. 2026; Lehner et al. 2024; Mamut et al. 2025) is therefore not only tied to the availability of time for sustainable practices but more fundamentally to the capacity to loosen the role of worktime as the dominant measure of social necessity, value, and social entitlement (Gerold et al. 2023; Gómez-Baggethun 2022; Kreinin and Aigner 2022).

Working time has long been a terrain of political and social contestation, as the liberation from/of work is a fundamental question of human agency (Barca 2019). In the context of slowing the "treadmill," we can understand working time not merely as a factor of production but as a central

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terrain of struggle through which socio-ecological change can be articulated (Schnaiberg 1980). Working-time reduction (WTR) not only challenges time-poor, high-carbon lifestyles (King and van den Bergh 2017; Pullinger 2014) but, more deeply, unsettles the assumption that worktime should serve as the primary measure of social contribution and entitlement (Gerold et al. 2023; Weeks 2011). This characterization responds to what Rosa (2003) described as the "social acceleration" of modern societies already two decades ago.

Debates over WTR cannot be understood in isolation. They are embedded in a deeply stratified global labor system shaped by historically uneven power relations, core-periphery dynamics, and welfare-regime differences that generate unequal capacities to shape work regimes (Anttila et al. 2015; de Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017). The world economy is structured around unequal exchange, such that the Global North's wealth, consumption, and work regimes depend on the net appropriation of labor and nature from the Global South (Althouse et al. 2023; Hornborg 1998). In 2021 alone, the North appropriated an estimated 826 billion hours of embodied labor from the South, where 90% of global labor hours are performed at wages 87–95% lower for the same work (Hickel et al. 2024). The capacity of high-income countries to pursue WTR is thus implicitly supported by a global system that keeps large shares of labor time cheap and externalized. These unequal relations also operate within Europe itself. Core-periphery hierarchies between Western and Eastern Europe shape labor stratification, dependency, and political agency, narrowing the space for WTR in semi-peripheral contexts where competitiveness and growth models rely on cheap, intensified labor (Artner 2018; Melegh 2017; Patočka et al. 2024). While WTR enjoys significant public support across Europe (Fagan 2003; European Commission, 2023) and average working hours have declined in the long term, especially since the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 (Astinova et al. 2024), the political uptake of WTR remains limited and uneven (Antal et al. 2024).[1] Workers in countries with stronger welfare systems are more likely to support WTR, even with income reductions, whereas in more unequal and semi-peripheral contexts, longer hours often remain a survival strategy (Antal et al. 2024; Anttila et al. 2015). The political feasibility of WTR is therefore shaped less by public legitimacy than by historically sedimented power relations, welfare regimes, and growth models that bind income, competitiveness, and social reproduction to labor time (de Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017).

While a growing literature documents the health, social, and environmental benefits of WTR and its policy designs (e.g., Fan et al. 2025; Fitzgerald and Schor 2023; Lukács and Antal 2022), comparatively less research examines how WTR can be achieved politically across different country contexts and welfare regimes. In a notable exception, Goerlich and Vis (2024) compare Germany, Ireland, and Spain, showing how national industrial relations shape distinct pathways for promoting WTR. However, we are not aware of comparative European analyses that explicitly include both core and semi-peripheral states.

Against this background, we examine how acceptance of WTR is assembled, contested, and constrained within specific institutional and political-economic contexts in Sweden, Germany, and Latvia. We analyze stakeholder acceptance of WTR as an eco-social condition for enabling 1.5 °C lifestyles, asking how actors embedded in different welfare-state and work-regime formations (Anttila et al. 2015; Esping-Andersen 1999, 1990; Orosz 2019) and positions within European core-periphery relations (Artner 2018; Melegh 2017) evaluate its desirability, feasibility, and political acceptability. By examining where well-being and environmental rationales gain traction, where they encounter resistance, and how they interact with concerns about productivity and competitiveness, we clarify why WTR appears simultaneously compelling and politically fragile in Europe's 1.5 °C transition strategies.

This article draws on the large-scale, interdisciplinary EU 1.5° Lifestyles research project. It aimed to identify the most impactful lifestyle changes in Europe, analyze conditions for their acceptance, prevent rebound effects, uncover the (political, economic, and societal) barriers to demand reduction and its governance, as well as assess how changes in welfare systems could contribute to lifestyle change, among others (Fuchs et al. 2026). Empirically, our analysis draws on two components of the project: a multi-national hybrid policy Delphi process (Laksevics et al. 2026) and Stakeholder Thinking Lab focus groups (Lehner et al. 2024). Together, these methods capture how stakeholder positions on WTR evolve through deliberation and how implementation pathways, actor constellations, and perceived barriers and enablers are articulated in concrete institutional settings.

In the discussion that follows, we provide a conceptual framework and literature review for our study, which is structured around 1) an overview of WTR and the time-income-consumption nexus, 2) WTR and European welfare-regime formations, focusing in depth on the three case studies of Sweden, Germany, and Latvia, and, finally, we elaborate on how 3) how global core-periphery relations shape possibilities for WTR. Thereafter, we detail the methodology, explain the findings, and provide a discussion and conclusion.

Conceptual framework

Why WTR matters for 1.5 °C lifestyles: time, income, and consumption

WTR is frequently proposed as an eco-social policy lever because it intervenes directly in the time-income nexus, helping stabilize both emissions-intensive production and consumption-intensive lifestyles (King and van den Bergh 2017; Pullinger 2014). The sustainability case for WTR is typically made through two interlinked pathways: (1) its macro-level effects on production and consumption and (2) its micro-level effects on everyday practices and time use.

At the macro or scale-effect level, a substantial body of research shows that longer working hours are associated with higher environmental impacts, a relationship commonly interpreted as reflecting greater volumes of wage labor, output, income, and consumption (e.g., Antal et al. 2021; Fitzgerald et al. 2015; Fitzgerald and Schor 2023; Knight et al. 2013). From this perspective, WTR functions as a structural lever that can help reduce environmental pressure by moderating the overall scale of production and consumption. Cross-national studies consistently find that societies with longer average working hours tend to have higher ecological footprints and carbon-dioxide (CO_2) emissions, supporting the contention that working time is tightly coupled to throughput in high-income economies (Hayden and Shandra 2009; Knight et al. 2013).

At the time-use level of everyday life, practice-based research suggests that changes in working time can reorganize daily routines, rhythms, and consumption patterns, potentially enabling lower-carbon ways of meeting needs, though not automatically and not always in environmentally beneficial directions – the empirical basis here is more fragile (Antal et al. 2021). Many emissions-intensive practices are currently stabilized by long working hours, time scarcity, commuting demands, and infrastructures designed around the high speed of everyday life (Gerold et al. 2023; Lukács and Antal 2022). Under some conditions, WTR can ease time constraints that otherwise push households toward convenience consumption, car dependence, and outsourced care; however, households may use additional free time in environmentally harmful ways, such as increased travel and consumption (Antal et al. 2021; Lukács and Antal 2022).

How working time is reduced, therefore, matters as much as the reduction in hours itself (de Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017; Lukács and Antal 2022). WTR proposals range from shorter working weeks and reduced daily hours to extended holidays, career breaks, and earlier retirement, often combined with rights and incentives that vary by sector and social group (Gerold and Nocker 2018; Lukács and Antal 2022). The literature suggests that policies most supportive of environmental sustainability collectively reduce standard full-time hours, such as moving toward 30–35-hour norms and reducing incomes for high-income earners, which leads to reduced (over)consumption. Collective reductions are more likely to curb environmentally harmful "time-poor" consumption patterns, limit rebound and scale effects associated with rising productivity, and could support gender parity by reshaping social norms around paid work for everyone (de Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017).

There is also broad agreement that WTR can help spread long-term declines in paid work more evenly across society, rather than concentrating adjustment pressures on particular groups (Antal et al. 2021; Jackson and Victor 2011). In this sense, WTR is often framed as a "bridge policy" in post-growth and degrowth transition thinking: it can redistribute declining work volumes, mitigate growth pressures from productivity increases, and help stabilize employment in low-growth or shrinking economies (Antal 2014; Jackson and Victor 2011). Simulation studies for Canada, for instance, suggest that WTR can support employment stability while reducing environmental consumption under low-growth scenarios (Jackson and Victor 2020). WTR can also be framed

explicitly as work sharing, redistributing work rather than relying on layoffs, drawing on experiences with short-time work schemes that protected employment during economic downturns (Hijzen and Venn 2011). In transition contexts, it can be combined with targeted contraction in inherently unsustainable sectors where scaling down is unavoidable (Kreinin and Aigner 2022), alongside expansion in socially necessary, low-carbon provisioning sectors. Beyond income and scale effects, WTR may reduce emissions through an "operational" channel. If shorter working hours translate into fewer operating hours, less commuting, and lower demand for office space, they can lower energy use and emissions independently of consumption effects (King and van den Bergh 2017).

Several authors caution, however, that WTR alone is insufficient if treated merely as a sectoral employment shift. Even if service-sector work is, on average, less energy-intensive per working hour than industrial production, decarbonization requires changes within production processes as well as reductions in overall demand and throughput; otherwise, downsizing risks carbon leakage or displacement effects (Hardt et al. 2020). Employment structures, productivity pressures, and hierarchical control within work therefore shape both well-being and sustainability outcomes. Reorienting work toward socially beneficial outcomes may require changing not only what is produced, but also how much is produced and under what temporal arrangements (Gerold et al. 2023; Gómez-Baggethun 2022; Kreinin and Aigner 2022).

WTR thus raises broader questions about the social legitimacy of work. The "foundational economy" and "provisioning systems" perspectives help clarify this distinction by highlighting sectors essential to everyday life, such as energy, housing, care, transport, and food, versus activities with weaker links to well-being (Fanning et al. 2021; Bärnthaler and Gough 2023). This framing also resonates with debates about "bullshit" (Graeber 2018) or "batshit" jobs (Hansen 2019) – socially harmful or dubious forms of work (Kreinin and Aigner 2022). At a deeper level, these debates point to "abstract labor time" as the dominant measure through which capitalist societies socially validate work (Postone 1993; Bonefeld 2010). When social contribution and entitlement are tied primarily to labor time, activities are deemed necessary not because they meet human or ecological needs, but because they sustain value production. This is problematic in a world of finite resources and shrinking carbon budgets, where social and ecological reproduction is sidelined while human and natural resources are squandered. It is also problematic from a humanist perspective, since human lifetimes become subordinated to the imperatives of economic accumulation instead of the unfolding of individual human potential within the finite span of human existence. WTR unsettles this logic by weakening the automatic equivalence between time spent in paid work and social legitimacy, thereby opening space to reevaluate which forms of work and time use are necessary for societal welfare in a 1.5 °C-compatible society (Gerold et al. 2023; Gómez-Baggethun 2022).

European welfare- and work-regimes, governance, and distribution

Welfare-state arrangements are central to the conditions for WTR because they shape both its material affordability and perceived legitimacy. Overall, European welfare states remain strongly employment-centered in rights and financing, and many reforms have reinforced the "adult worker model" (Dingeldey 2007). While all welfare regimes operate under the shared constraint of employment-centered social mediation, differences in institutional design and power relations mean some countries and actors have more leverage than others to contest, reinterpret, or partially loosen the link between labor time, social rights, and legitimacy. Comparative research highlights persistent cross-national differences in average hours, time autonomy, collective regulation, and work-life balance outcomes, and thus differences in the intensity and the form of citizens' wishes for WTR in the three case countries (Antal et al. 2024; Anttila et al. 2015; Fagan 2003). This work suggests that in high-security Nordic regimes (Sweden), preferences for shorter hours are more likely to translate into actual reductions; in coordinated but norm-bound regimes (Germany), preferences are strongly mediated by gendered norms and occupational standards; and in lower-security and lower-income regimes (Latvia), preferences are constrained by financial necessity to such an extent that stated "desires" for shorter hours are either suppressed or disconnected from feasible choices (Anttila et al. 2015).

Sweden, as noted above, has historically exemplified the ideal-type Nordic welfare regime, with comparatively short standard working hours, strong collective bargaining, high union density – still around 70% today (Eurofound 2024a), and extensive welfare provision, with WTR normalized as a collective good (Kolberg and Esping-Andersen 1991; Esping-Andersen 1990). While neoliberal reforms have also eroded the universal character and coverage rate of the Swedish welfare system over the past 30 years, the long-term legacy of Social Democratic dominance has fostered path-dependent trajectories still aligned with the ideals of an encompassing welfare state (Ottosson, 2026). Nordic welfare regimes have historically had the highest working-time autonomy and flexibility, with the lowest working hours and least unsocial working hours (scheduled outside conventional working hours), the highest incidence of work-life balance, and the highest job satisfaction (Anttila et al. 2015). Flexibility has been employee-oriented, with greater individual and collective control over schedules and fewer penalties associated with reduced hours (Chung and Tijdens 2013). Neoliberal and New Public Management policies in Sweden have shifted toward workfare tendencies and welfare conditionality focused on individual responsibility, weakening autonomy in some sectors and occupations (notably teachers). Nevertheless, these have modified but not entirely displaced the path-dependent institutional features of the Nordic work-time regime (Blomqvist and Winblad, 2024; Östling, 2025). Historic collective-bargaining institutions, despite neoliberal reforms, make WTR policies comparatively salient and achievable in Sweden, with debates framed in terms of well-being, gender equality, health, and sustainability (Landsorganisationen i Sverige, 2025; Nässén and Larsson 2015). Nevertheless, other Nordic countries, such as Denmark, have achieved larger reductions in WTR in recent decades. Finland, Norway, and Denmark all have higher proportions of workers with full-time work of less than 40 h, and Swedish workers have some of the longest expected working lives (Landsorganisationen i Sverige, 2025).

Germany has historically been considered a continental or conservative-corporatist welfare regime, representing an intermediate case in which working-time regulation is comparatively strong but unevenly distributed, though labor-market deregulation and work intensification are slowly changing this situation (Esping-Andersen 1990; Giesselmann 2015; Kolberg and Esping-Andersen 1991). In the European Working Conditions Survey-based clustering, Germany belongs to the Central-European flexibility regime, characterized by regulated worktime, mid-range work-life balance, and low unsocial hours, but not as autonomy- and flexibility-rich as the Nordic group (Anttila et al. 2015). Standard work hours are moderate to low (Eurostat 2024); collective bargaining remains influential (40–50% coverage), and union density is moderate (16–17%) (Eurofound 2024b). German workplaces have been characterized by relatively greater employer-oriented flexibility and more limited employee-oriented flexibility than in the Nordics (Chung and Tijdens 2013). Germany also has a history of negotiated WTR, earnings-related social insurance, and relatively strong employment protection for "insiders," or those with unlimited contracts, yet this protection has become increasingly uneven through dualization, with new and entry-level positions especially precarized (Giesselmann 2015; Guimarães et al. 2026). Germany's 2019 *Brückenteilzeit* ("bridge part-time") legislation allows workers in relatively secure employment to temporarily reduce working hours and retain the right to return to full-time work; however, access and take-up have been strongest among higher-qualified, better-paid employees, who can absorb the income loss. "Outsiders", those with flexible and fixed-term contracts, have less practical security to take up WTR (Boockmann et al., 2024). Working-time autonomy is lower than in Nordic countries, with widespread part-time work among women, long full hours among men, and persistent care mismatches, as institutional frameworks and entrenched norms shape preferences as much as individual choice (Antal et al. 2024; Yerkes and Visser 2005). Existing research suggests that WTR in Germany advances primarily through the industrial-relations "social partnership" route, via sectoral or company-level collective agreements, including "individual choice models" embedded in collective agreements (Goerlich and Vis 2024). Historic and contemporary studies highlight both the centrality of working time as a bargaining battleground, the ways reductions have led to harmful flexibilization (employer-controlled schedule changes creating insecurity or unpredictability for workers, rather than more agency over working time), and how it continues to be shaped by workplace norms and perceived career risks (Bispinck 2006; Guimarães et al. 2026; Seifert and Trinczek 2000; Westrich 2025).

As a mixed post-socialist welfare-state regime, Latvia contrasts sharply with the Nordic and Continental types. Characterized by relatively low social expenditure, fragmented benefits, limited decommodification, strong exposure of individuals to labor market risks, weak enforcement of labor law, and a strong reliance on labor-market participation for welfare, Latvia stands out for its very high total workload (Eurostat 2024; Fenger 2007; Hazans 2005; Orosz 2019). Latvian women spend more than 500 min per day in paid and unpaid work, 90 min more than Swedish women and 150 min more than German women on average (Charmes 2015). In the European Working Conditions Survey-based clustering, Latvia belongs to the Eastern European regime "B," with lower incomes, long working hours, frequent unsocial hours, widespread unpaid overtime, higher time poverty, pronounced inequalities, and low individual control over working time (Anttila et al. 2015). Latvia also has high in-work poverty, including among older workers, and one of the highest rates of labor force participation among retirement-aged people, reflecting financial necessity and weak welfare-state provisions (Niklass 2019; Aidukaitė and Blažienė, 2021). Union density is low and decreasing – 10% of employees in 2019 (Eurofound 2024c), suggesting strong temporal constraints with limited leverage over working time and a regime in which flexibility primarily serves organizational rather than employee needs. This characterization helps explain why WTR has been relatively less discussed in Latvia. Although a citizen-proposed initiative received more than 10,000 votes on "Mana Balss" in 2022, parliament dismissed it without extended discussion. Meanwhile, the municipality of Talsi's 2024 seven-month, four-day working week, implemented as an austerity measure, was widely regarded as an extreme case after many employees left because of reduced salaries (Meļehovs 2022).

These welfare and work-regime differences highlight divergent historical configurations of labor's subordination to value and abstract labor time (Bonefeld 2010). WTR appears politically feasible where welfare institutions partially buffer individuals from the compulsion to sell labor time, yet even in the Nordic case, individual WTR remains mediated through income loss and consumption reduction, although collective WTR seeks to remove the direct income penalty (Landsorganisationen i Sverige, 2025; Nässén and Larsson 2015). In Germany, norm-bound "standard" hours and the dualization of protection illustrate how abstract labor time is reproduced through differentiated or class-based access to security, while collective struggles over hours tend to reconfigure rather than dissolve the temporal logic of valorization (Bispinck 2006; Boockmann et al., 2024; Seifert and Trinczek 2000). Latvia exposes the coercive side of this logic most strongly: long hours, weak welfare, and high in-work poverty render labor time a direct survival imperative, making WTR a more controversial political demand (Niklass 2019). WTR thus emerges less as a straightforward emancipatory silver-bullet project than as a limited and fragile attempt to negotiate the temporal pressures of capitalism, whose transformative potential depends on whether it can be decoupled from value, income dependence, and employment-centered social mediation (Gerold et al. 2023; Gómez-Baggethun 2022; Kallis et al. 2013).

Global core-periphery relations, competition, and WTR

The capitalist "treadmill of production" structures social life through a shared domination by abstract labor time organized around the imperatives of value production (Schnaiberg 1980; Postone 1993). Yet the capacity to negotiate or resist this temporal logic is highly unequal. As discussed above, workers in some countries and sectors can translate productivity gains into shorter hours, while others remain bound to longer and more intensified labor. These asymmetries reflect unequal global relations of exchange, in which high-income economies sustain their temporal freedoms by appropriating cheap labor and nature elsewhere (Althouse et al. 2023; Brand and Wissen 2025; Hickel et al. 2024; Hornborg 1998). This spatial organization of exploitation shapes both welfare-regime formations and the political feasibility of WTR: where surplus value and labor time can be externalized, reductions in working hours can be absorbed without threatening accumulation; where they cannot, WTR remains tightly constrained by competitive pressures.

Sweden, Germany, and Latvia are all located in "Cluster 3," or "reproduction of the core," countries in Althouse et al.'s (2023) simplified framework of ecologically unequal exchange globally. This means all three countries benefit from extracting labor and material resources through global value chains. The structural logic of core reproduction enables relatively high welfare levels and favorable work

regimes with little environmental degradation, built on large-scale ecological and labor displacement elsewhere. Within Europe, Germany has been described as the "center of the center" of transnational monopoly capitalism, anchoring European accumulation, innovation, and corporate power (Artner 2018; Melegh 2017). However, this positionality is changing rapidly amid a shifting global geoeconomic landscape, due to increasing economic dynamism and industrial leadership in parts of Asia, particularly China (Mayr et al. 2026).

While all three case countries are considered "core" countries globally (Althouse et al. 2023), rapid shifts and dynamism in this landscape in recent years mean that important distinctions and nuances also exist among these three countries. Exploitation rates remain systematically lower in core countries than in Eastern Europe, where higher exploitation feeds value back into the core through profit repatriation and price-setting power (Artner 2018). Latvia's inclusion in the same cluster shows that core-periphery relations within Europe are internally stratified, and that some Eastern European countries can partially participate in core-like patterns, without escaping dependency. Unlike Germany or Sweden, Latvia's position is more exposed to shifts in the organization of global value chains and less able to sustain its advantages autonomously. Latvia is part of the "immediate periphery of the core," benefiting from ecological and economic displacement but without the same structural security (Althouse et al. 2023).

Within Europe, core-periphery relations reflect structurally reproduced hierarchies embedded in the capitalist world-system. Eastern and parts of Southern Europe occupy "semi-peripheral" positions that combine elements of both core integration and subordinate dependency (Boatcă 2006). Semi-peripheries function as intermediate zones that absorb systemic pressures from the most advantageously placed countries (like Germany and Sweden) while remaining structurally more exposed to labor exploitation and instability. In the European context, this has meant that Central and Eastern Europe have repeatedly served as sites for labor-intensive production, ecological degradation, and crisis adjustment, even as they are formally integrated into European markets and institutions, and benefit from globally unequal exchange themselves (Grančayová et al. 2026; Patočka et al. 2024). Semi-peripheral countries face a structural dilemma: participation in European Union (EU) production networks can improve incomes and employment, but often at the cost of intensified ecological degradation and longer working hours (Grančayová et al. 2026; Patočka et al. 2024).

Progressive work regimes, including the political feasibility of WTR, are therefore not simply the outcome of domestic policy choices or union strength, but welfare regimes that are structurally enabled by their core position in European and global hierarchies of labor and value, where surplus labor time is systematically externalized to peripheral regions.

Methods

This article analyses stakeholder acceptance of WTR as an eco-social policy condition that could enable 1.5 °C lifestyles. We draw on two empirical components of the EU 1.5° Lifestyles project: (1) a multi-national hybrid policy Delphi process (Laksevics et al. 2026; Mamut et al. 2025) and (2) "Stakeholder Thinking Lab" focus groups (Lehner et al. 2024), using previously unexplored data on WTR. Figure 1 summarizes the study's empirical design.

We focus on case studies of Sweden (SE), Germany (DE), and Latvia (LV) to enable comparison across different European welfare-state and worktime regimes (Anttila et al. 2015), while using a shared, standardized research design across countries. The two components are complementary: the Delphi elicits structured assessments of policy desirability/feasibility (and how they may shift across rounds of discussions), as well as the rationales behind them (Gahbauer et al. 2022; Laksevics et al. 2026; Linstone and Turoff 1975), while the focus group enables deeper, solution-oriented exploration of implementation pathways, actor constellations, and political strategies shaping the acceptance of WTR (Lehner et al. 2024).

Our overall analytical approach is abductive. We combine deductive elements (using shared instruments, predefined guiding questions, and structured coding frames) with inductive elements (remaining open to context-specific rationales, concerns, and enabling conditions that emerged in discussion) (Lehner et al. 2024). The aim is not to measure public opinion but to capture informed stakeholder

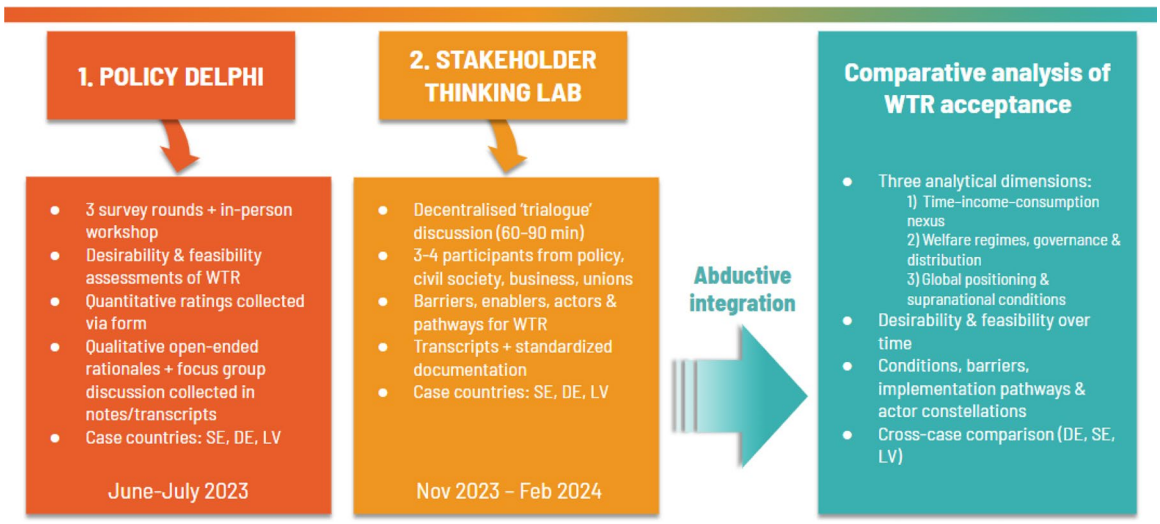


Figure 1. Overview of the empirical design and analytical integration.

reasoning, including dissenting perspectives, and to identify perceived barriers and enablers shaping acceptance of WTR in different working-time regime contexts.

Across the Delphis and STLs, participants provided informed consent using project-consent forms (see Appendix), and we translated materials into English for comparative analysis. Reporting is anonymized to prevent attribution.

Policy Delphi approach

We used a hybrid policy Delphi approach to capture heterogeneous stakeholder perspectives on eco-social policy options. Unlike the "classical" Delphi, which seeks consensus among a homogeneous expert group, the policy Delphi elicits and contrasts diverse policy positions among stakeholders with different backgrounds and interests (Linstone and Turoff 1975; Laksevics et al. 2026). The hybrid format combined three rounds of online survey voting with an in-person workshop including facilitated qualitative focus-group discussions (Gahbauer et al. 2022; Laksevics et al. 2026).

Participants evaluated policies on two dimensions: desirability for enabling 1.5 °C lifestyles (four-point Likert scale) and feasibility of implementation over time (2030, 2040, 2050, never). We avoided neutral response options to encourage explicit judgments (Turoff 1970). Open-ended rationales accompanied survey responses, allowing us to interpret quantitative patterns in light of underlying arguments and conditions of support. The workshop included two facilitated focus groups per country (typically 5–9 participants) that addressed the rationale for desirability and feasibility assessments, as well as perceived risks and distributional concerns. Subsequent survey rounds allowed participants to revise assessments following deliberation. In this article, we treat WTR as the focal policy theme and analyze acceptance patterns and perceived preconditions for broader uptake using the combined Delphi materials (Gahbauer et al. 2022).

We recruited participants to maximize diversity of expertise and institutional positions relevant to eco-social policy development, with 11–14 participants per country from policymaking, academia, business, trade unions, and civil society. For this analysis, we focus on materials from Germany, Sweden, and Latvia, using the shared Delphi instrument to compare how acceptance of WTR is shaped by different socio-economic contexts and welfare-state arrangements (Esping-Andersen 1999, 1990; Orosz 2019).

Stakeholder Thinking Lab

The Stakeholder Thinking Lab (STL) focus group "trialogues" complemented the Delphi study by exploring solution pathways through structured, moderated small-group discussions focused specifically

Table 1. Participant profiles in the Stakeholder Thinking Lab.

Country	Professional background
Sweden	SE Expert A: Researcher on WTR
	SE Expert B: Trade union official (transport)
	SE Expert C: Public official (consumer welfare)
	SE Expert D: Business representative / already instituted WTR policies
Germany	DE Expert A: Trade union official (health sector)
	DE Expert B: Business representative / already instituted WTR policies
	DE Expert C: Public official (education)
Latvia	LV Expert A: Public official (finance sector)
	LV Expert B: Business representative
	LV Expert C: Elected representative (parliamentarian)

on achieving WTR (Lehner et al. 2024). Each trialogue brought together three to four expert participants and a trained moderator, following a standardized dialogue guide to enable comparability across countries and topics (see Appendix). Sessions were held between late 2023 and early 2024, online and in person, and designed for in-depth exchange. The dialogue guide covered policy strategies, barriers and enablers, responsible actors, and coalition-building; with consent, we audio-recorded and transcribed the sessions. Documentation followed a standardized template and included short quotations to preserve participants' voices while maintaining anonymization (Lehner et al. 2024). Table 1 summarizes participant profiles across the three countries.

Limitations

This study has several important limitations. While we discuss cross-country differences, participant numbers were relatively small: the policy Delphi involved 11–14 stakeholders per country across rounds, and the focus groups included three to four experts per country. The findings are therefore not statistically generalizable and do not comprehensively represent national stakeholder fields. The stakeholder-based design also reflects the perspectives of participants who were willing and able to engage in deliberative formats. Despite efforts to ensure diversity of expertise and institutional positions, some viewpoints may be underrepresented, and cross-country variation in participant profiles may have influenced observed patterns. Accordingly, the cross-national comparison is analytical rather than representative, and the findings should be read as exploratory.

Results

In this section, we present findings from the Delphi process and STLs across Sweden, Germany, and Latvia. We have organized stakeholder concerns into three interconnected dimensions, corresponding to the scales of structural preconditions for WTR to be feasible as an eco-social policy as described in the conceptual framework. The first dimension, "the time-income-consumption nexus," examines how stakeholders reason about the interrelations between working time, income, consumption, and well-being. The second dimension, "welfare and work regimes, governance, and distribution," addresses country-level institutional configurations and distributional design concerns for WTR. The third dimension, "global economic positioning and supranational conditions," examines the WTR reasoning on concerns related to countries' positions in the global economy and geopolitical risk.

Time-income-consumption nexus

The discussions addressed the conditions necessary for WTR as an eco-social policy, with participants therefore giving particular attention to its effects on consumption and quality of life. Stakeholders engaged with questions about whether and how WTR could improve well-being, how it would affect high-carbon consumption, and whether it could support alternative visions of the "good life." While stakeholders mostly agreed that WTR could increase well-being, views on its effects on productivity and consumption were significantly more contested - also shaped by the participants' views on the desirability of reduced production (degrowth).

Stakeholders across the three countries mostly associated WTR with improved mental and physical health, reduced stress, and a better quality of life. WTR was generally recognized for addressing burnout, fatigue, and boundary erosion associated with the demands of work culture, which often lead to neglect of health and personal relationships. In the Swedish discussions, participants tended to link WTR to reducing workplace hazards and health risks and to ensuring long-term work capacity, while in the German discussions, participants recognized well-being as a secondary benefit to be balanced against increased productivity and economic performance. Swedish and German stakeholders were, nevertheless, more likely to frame the desire for more time for family, personal development, and community as a people's desire, while Latvian stakeholders, especially in the Delphi, argued that higher incomes are more necessary for many than more leisure time under current configurations. The disagreement centered on the point at which income gains stop improving quality of life. This tension reflected broader arguments about the requirement of a certain level of social security before one is willing to consider WTR. While participants in Latvia recognized that slowing the pace of life could lead to more non-commodified pursuits of well-being, disagreements arose over how people would spend their new free time.

Stakeholders held different views on whether WTR is liberating for households, especially if it means reduced childcare and long-term care options and might unevenly increase unpaid care work for household members. German Delphi participants, especially, noted that the current acceleration of work makes it difficult to find time for "cooking from scratch," "repairing," or "political participation," forcing reliance on convenience-based, high-carbon provisioning. The lifestyle that outsources these aspects of sustaining one's household to the market and care services has long been associated with higher freedom, especially for women who are often burdened with higher unpaid working hours under family pressure based on gendered care roles. At both governance and lifestyle levels, participants suggested moving beyond a system that equates work solely with wage labor, such as increasing child benefits, which they again assessed as carrying the risk of "housewifization."[2] In this way, participants expected a shift in household-labor allocation, as well as broader community involvement in sharing resources and unpaid work, to accompany WTR for it to compete with convenience-driven, often high-carbon provisioning.

In the Delphis, some stakeholders associated paid work and careers with meaning and self-realization in one's life, noting that people are willing to work overtime to pursue these objectives. They noted that current ideologies of work, self-development, and coaching often emphasize pursuing "passion" to produce value for society, which can be a barrier to WTR. Nevertheless, some participants argued that people pursue unpaid passions no less enthusiastically, whether or not they are thought to increase their value in the labor market, especially if they relate to care, creativity, or societal recognition. A precondition for the acceptance and perceived desirability of WTR, therefore, also depends on how different forms of work are valued. There was disagreement among participants about whether additional free time would result in repair, care, or civic engagement, or lead to unhealthy and addictive behaviors with little or negative value to society. Thus, they thought the "work ethic," which they regarded as morally central to society, needed to be preserved across pursuits outside paid labor. As one Swedish participant noted, both "inner and outer transitions" are needed: reducing consumption depends on shifts in what people regard as "doing well," as well as on policies in other sectors.

Many stakeholders doubted that reducing working hours while maintaining income would lead to low-carbon leisure. Instead, they predicted a scenario in which carbon-intensive industries would appropriate free time through cheap flights, shopping, and online retail. One participant in the Latvian STL linked it to prevalent business models designed to colonize attention, observing that platforms like Temu are "engineered to fill any void in time with immediate consumption." While they overall recognized WTR as capable of reducing time poverty, the demand for fast-paced consumption did not appear to decrease automatically. As a German participant put it in the STL: "If people will have the same income with more time to spend it, of course they'll consume more." In this view, a six-hour workday was generally considered more sustainable than an extra day off, as the latter makes high-emission activities, such as travel, more appealing, while the former provides more opportunities for self-care.

Some stakeholders argued that WTR itself is neutral and can be sustainable only if combined with consumption-reducing policies and possibly the decommodification of consumption, for example,

through universal basic services (UBS). They saw this approach as a way to reduce income without reducing quality of life and to lessen people's reliance on the "treadmill of production." German participants also emphasized policies that make sustainable leisure easier and carbon-intensive leisure more difficult. In this context, WTR was seen as a complementary policy to other sustainability policies rather than the central focus of eco-social transformation.

Welfare and work regimes, governance, and distribution

The second major dimension of eco-social potential concerned domestic institutional conditions: how existing welfare-state arrangements, labor-market institutions, and governance capacities structure stakeholder assessments of WTR feasibility and justice. Cross-country differences were most pronounced here, reflecting differing welfare-regime logics and levels of institutional trust.

Across all countries, WTR was perceived as a risk for lower-income groups. Latvian stakeholders in both the Delphi and STL argued that people with lower incomes might use the extra day to "work small jobs" or engage in the grey economy to increase or maintain their purchasing power and quality of life, as secondary employment, post-retirement work, and voluntary overtime are common across the country. As a German STL participant noted, the most vulnerable workers require wage compensation. Meanwhile, fully compensating everyone could undermine the goal of reducing consumption. This again led to discussions of complementary policies, such as income and wealth caps or restrictions on high-carbon consumption. Some participants proposed combining WTR with a universal basic income (UBI), suggesting that a guaranteed income floor could enable individuals to choose meaningful work and increase the value of necessary but currently undervalued work. However, UBI was more contentious than WTR and often conflicted with established attitudes toward work and provisioning systems.

Across all countries, stakeholders worried about staffing shortages. In sectors such as healthcare, nursing, and long-term care, participants questioned whether they could reduce hours without compromising service quality or requiring unrealistic workforce expansions. As one German STL participant observed: "In hospitals, in the hospital dispute, there are these so-called relief contracts, because we have a shortage of skilled labor in many places, and then you have the 35 hour [week], but you always work unpaid overtime, because it's not enough anyway." Additionally, a Latvian STL participant noted that, if medical services are reduced to four days, it will either require more doctors ("Where will you get them?") or result in longer waiting times and reduced access. For care workers, however, a Swedish STL participant suggested precisely implementing WTR in "female-dominated healthcare professions, nurses, elder care workers, childcare workers, all of these are those that should come first" due to the pressures and high burnout rates associated with the sector. Latvian discussions framed the need for more workers not just as more expensive, but as the most challenging, with participants also noting an ongoing labor shortage.

Stakeholders also discussed the feasibility of WTR, noting that its implementation depends on institutional and coordination mechanisms. Where trade unions and collective bargaining are strong, more balanced and worker-friendly designs could be implemented. For example, the Swedish discussions depicted governance as a collaborative process involving unions, employers, civil society, and state actors, in which multiple policy-implementation approaches through co-creation are possible. In Sweden and Germany, stakeholders saw collective agreements, individual WTR, employer-led pilots, and statutory rights operating in parallel and mutually reinforcing one another. These differences stem less from normative disagreement than from variation in actor constellations and institutional capacity (see Table 2).

The state's expected role in implementing WTR varied across contexts and discussions. Several stakeholders preferred the state as an enabler, establishing rights, supporting transitions, and providing regulatory frameworks that encourage WTR, rather than as an enforcer of a single model. In the German STL, participants saw the state as potentially leading the way in implementing measurable pilot projects and evaluating their effects. The identified drawback, however, was that these effects might reflect other contextual factors explored earlier, and the measures might miss the potential for more radical and holistic cultural transformation. In the Latvian discussion, participants viewed

Table 2. Summary of key country differences in implementing WTR.

	Sweden	Germany	Latvia
Key implementing actors	Trade unions, employers, state agencies	State, trade unions	Political leaders, state elites, EU/global actors
Role of trade unions	Central drivers of WTR	Negotiating partners	Weak or marginal
Role of employers	Active implementers and innovators	Conditional adopters	Cost- and risk-sensitive
Role of the state	Enabler, regulator, rights-provider	Regulator, evaluator	Legitimizer, coordinator
Civil society	Complementary and engaged	Consultative	Weak or fragmented
Mode of coordination	Collective bargaining and social dialogue	Collective bargaining and social dialogue	Leadership-driven, top-down

intermediary institutions as weaker, civil society as fragmented, labor representation as sparser, and institutional trust as lower; they expected (individual) political leaders or supranational actors to implement change. Stakeholders in Latvia were more skeptical about the effectiveness of national action and looked more to broader social agreements from the EU or global levels.

Global economic positioning and supranational conditions

Beyond individual and governance aspects, stakeholders also discussed whether national action would be feasible under global competitive pressures, value-chain hierarchies, and geopolitical constraints. In this, they saw the eco-social feasibility of WTR as dependent on the agency of different economies within global structures of production and exchange.

Stakeholders questioned not only WTR's potential to reduce consumption but also its potential to reduce production. While productivity was a major concern, many participants believed it could be maintained or even increased under WTR across many sectors through reorganization, collective learning, and more shifts. Some participants even cited studies on productivity gains from pilot projects or on historical reductions in working hours that led to increased output. In the German discussions, productivity was a central concern to be closely evaluated, whereas the Swedish participants saw it as a potential outcome of the humanization of work. Overall, stakeholders thought the growth and competition imperative, together with improved work-life balance and health, could increase productivity without significantly disrupting production. Importantly, stakeholders viewed productivity losses as a threat, except among participants sympathetic to degrowth and alternative business models, arguing against increased throughput. In the Delphi debates, the opposing argument was that reduced economic capacity might hinder the green investments needed to transform industries and infrastructure. This tension between growth and degrowth perspectives was prevalent across all countries.

In the Latvian discussions, WTR feasibility was closely linked to concerns about lower competitiveness in the global economy and a subordinate position in global value chains. There was widespread belief that WTR is only possible in high-income countries, which are at the top of global work valuation and produce more "added value." Participants saw competition as possible through lower prices and longer, more intensive labor hours, but WTR could challenge this dynamic, reducing global competition and potentially driving workers to other countries. Swedish and German stakeholders, positioned in core economies with greater structural security, were generally more open to WTR, viewing it through the lens of work-life balance and improved productivity rather than competitive threat. Here, Germany's and Sweden's capacities to sustain shorter working hours without undermining competitiveness are structurally enabled by their higher position in European and global hierarchies, where labor time can be externalized to peripheral regions.[3]

Latvian discussions also highlighted geopolitical security as a constraint on WTR, influenced by Russia's war on Ukraine. Participants argued that WTR could threaten economic and geopolitical competitiveness against states with more competitive economies and against aggressive, non-democratic regimes. One participant suggested that a four-day work week might only be politically sellable if "the fifth day is spent in the National Guard." This concern was largely absent from Swedish and German discussions because of the perceived lower threat of foreign invasion and a generally greater sense of stability against external pressures and market fluctuations, such as global economic crises and inflation driven by disruptions.

Given these constraints, Latvian stakeholders most eagerly advocated for supranational solutions. Participants in both Delphi and STL discussions were skeptical of the effectiveness of national action alone and assumed that initiatives to curb production, consumption, and working hours without undermining competitiveness should come from the EU and global levels. WTR was deemed viable only through wider directives, new social contracts, or at least regional synchronization with neighboring states, whose economic policies have long been monitored to ensure local businesses remain competitive. This shows that the sense of security in pursuing WTR depends not only on institutional capacity and the welfare system but also on the economy's structure, size, exposure to external shocks, and dependency within global hierarchies of labor and value.

Country comparison in support for WTR

Taken together, despite personal sympathy toward WTR, stakeholders in the three case countries held different views of its eco-social feasibility. This gap indicates that stakeholders evaluated the policy across multiple registers. Latvian participants expressed the strongest personal longing for WTR but were also the most skeptical of its political viability. Thus, we can distinguish between what stakeholders personally desired, what they considered socially beneficial, what they evaluated as environmentally less harmful, what they judged institutionally feasible, and what they were willing to support publicly. The concerns and discourse of the WTR debate itself shifted under different conditions. In Sweden, where participants perceived income security, institutional coordination, and external stability as sufficient, stakeholders debated design and distribution. In Latvia, where these conditions were seen as unsatisfactory or available merely to the highest earners, stakeholders debated the broader structural preconditions. In Germany, stakeholders emphasized procedural governance through pilots, evidence, and sectoral negotiation to enable implementation to scale. These differences stem less from normative disagreement than from variation in perceived room for maneuver. Stakeholder acceptance of WTR, in these debates, was thus best understood not as a binary (support/oppose) but as a conditional posture shaped by the interaction of welfare capacity, labor-market institutions, and global positioning. Figure 2 summarizes these cross-country patterns. Given the methodological constraints,

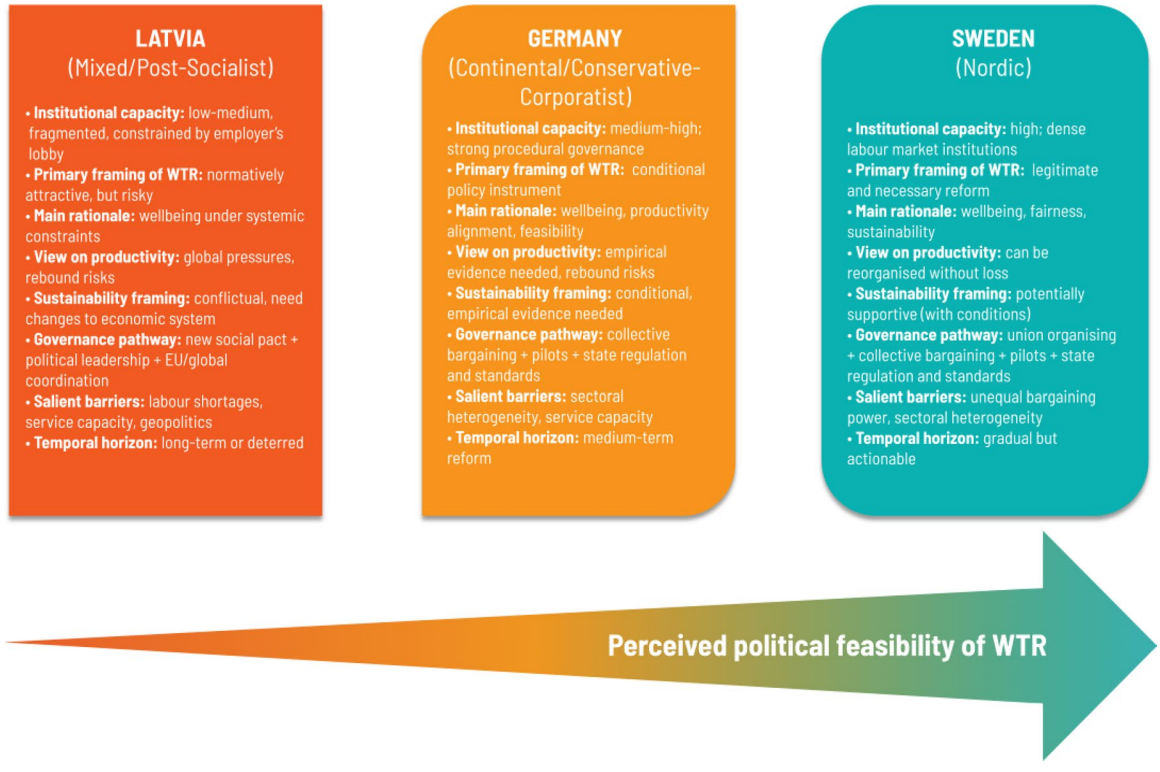


Figure 2. Summary comparison of different regime conditions for WTR.

the comparative value lies not in ranking countries by support, but in clarifying how the same policy proposal is refracted through different institutional lenses.

Discussion

In this article, we examined how stakeholder acceptance of WTR is assembled, constrained, and politicized across different welfare regimes and positions in the global political economy, and what this implies for WTR as an eco-social condition for enabling "1.5 °C lifestyles" (Kreinin et al. 2024; Laksevics et al. 2026). Rather than asking whether WTR is desirable in the abstract, the analysis focused on how actors embedded in concrete national and institutional contexts reason about its feasibility, distributive consequences, and political acceptability. By synthesizing the hybrid Policy Delphi and STL in Sweden, Germany, and Latvia, we have shown that while well-being-based support for WTR is widespread, translating it into an implementable eco-social policy remains uneven and fragile.

Our findings highlight that WTR cannot be understood merely as a technical labor-market reform or lifestyle policy, but as a contested intervention into the temporal logic of capitalist societies, where labor time functions as a dominant measure of social necessity, entitlement, and value (Bonefeld 2010; Postone 1993; Weeks 2011). Stakeholders repeatedly returned to whether, and under what conditions, labor time can be loosened as the organizing principle of social reproduction without threatening income security, welfare provision, competitiveness, or geopolitical stability. In this sense, WTR functions as a diagnostic lens that exposes the structural tensions of pursuing sufficiency-oriented transitions within growth-dependent political economies (Gerold et al. 2023; Kallis et al. 2013).

When assessed as an ecological tool, acceptance of WTR became conditional. Stakeholders distinguished between the "income effect," in which reduced working hours lead to lower incomes and consumption, and the "time effect," in which increased leisure time shapes consumption patterns (King and van den Bergh 2017). While participants recognized the income effect as potentially reducing consumption, the time effect was more contested, as they saw additional free time as easily colonized by carbon-intensive consumption under contemporary infrastructures of convenience, attention capture, and "social acceleration" (Rosa 2003). These concerns were particularly salient given that countries with shorter working hours, such as Germany and Sweden, continue to exhibit higher consumption and carbon footprints than Latvia (Anttila et al. 2015; Cap et al. 2024). As a result, stakeholders often framed WTR as feasible only in high-income core countries, reflecting broader dynamics of unequal exchange (Althouse et al. 2023; Hickel et al. 2024) and raising concerns about fairness and international coordination.

Distributional concerns further conditioned acceptance. Reduced income was contested as unfair for those whose earnings were already perceived as insufficient to meet basic needs, particularly in Latvia. German stakeholders more often favored compensated designs, while many Latvian participants argued that compensation would increase consumption, reflecting unmet expected needs. Swedish stakeholders were the most optimistic, underscoring the importance of income security and welfare provision as preconditions for perceived worker safety. This finding aligns with research showing that income security and supportive welfare systems are central to the feasibility of WTR (Guimarães et al. 2026), and that voluntary reductions are largely confined to better-off households (Antal et al. 2024).

Differences in welfare-state capacity shape whether WTR appears as a negotiable reform or a precarious demand. Where institutions partially buffer individuals from the compulsion to sell labor time, WTR becomes a matter of design and sequencing rather than feasibility (de Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017). In Sweden, collective bargaining, coordinated employer action, and state support were assumed to manage distributional risks and prevent rising inequality, allowing WTR to plausibly function as a collective good (Esping-Andersen 1990; Anttila et al. 2015). In Germany, WTR was framed as conditional and evidence-dependent, advancing primarily through social partnership arrangements, collective agreements, and pilots that could stabilize reform within existing productivity regimes and employment norms (Giesselmann 2015; Goerlich and Vis 2024; Westrich 2025). In Latvia,

by contrast, high in-work poverty, labor shortages, weak labor representation, and limited fiscal space rendered working time a survival imperative, making WTR appear politically risky unless accompanied by substantial compensatory measures (Niklass 2019; Orosz 2019).

An actor-centered institutionalist perspective further highlights differences in coordination capacity. In Sweden, stakeholders described a plural coordination architecture in which unions, employers, the state, and civil society possess recognized roles, shifting debates toward implementation rather than legitimacy (Nässén and Larsson 2015). In Germany, stakeholders perceived coordination as more procedural and evidence-oriented, with action channeled through formalized institutional processes (Goerlich and Vis 2024). In Latvia, the lack of intermediary interest and power led stakeholders to look upward to political leaders, and especially the EU, for legitimation and leadership.

Furthermore, global core-periphery relations shape the political feasibility of WTR. Sweden and Germany benefit from institutional and geopolitical insulation that allows experimentation with progressive labor reforms without immediately jeopardizing accumulation (Althouse et al. 2023; Hickel et al. 2024). Latvia's more exposed semi-peripheral position constrains such experimentation, leading stakeholders to frame WTR as viable "only elsewhere" or mainly through supranational coordination or broader de/post-growth transformations. Geopolitical concerns, particularly Russia's aggression against Ukraine, further positioned WTR as a threat to security if Latvia's fragile global competitiveness is negatively affected.

WTR's appeal lies in its capacity to challenge the temporal contradictions of growth-dependent societies (Rosa 2003), yet this same quality makes it politically fragile. WTR can contribute to 1.5 °C-compatible transitions only if embedded in broader institutional arrangements that address income security, consumption norms, household-care allocation, welfare provision, and global inequalities. The uneven perceptions of political feasibility and acceptance of WTR across Sweden, Germany, and Latvia thus reflect not a lack of legitimacy, but the temporal, social, and political constraints of the global economic order.

Conclusion

Working time reduction, the historic terrain of industrial struggles, has regained visibility in European policy and public debate in recent years. These struggles over working time are embedded in unequal welfare regimes, shaped by historic labor struggles and stratified core-periphery relations, which shape the political space for reducing hours without reproducing insecurity and dependency (Anttila et al. 2015; Artner 2018; de Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017; Hickel et al. 2024; Hornborg 1998).

Empirically, our analysis of stakeholder perceptions in Sweden, Germany, and Latvia shows that the normative case for WTR on well-being grounds travels easily, but that its ecological and political feasibility does not. Stakeholders also foregrounded the conditionality of "time effects," warning that carbon-intensive consumption can rapidly colonize leisure. WTR can open temporal space for sustainable practices, but only where provisioning systems, consumption norms, and complementary regulations make low-carbon uses of time easier and high-carbon options less attractive (Antal et al. 2021). The strongest cross-national differences concerned distribution, institutional capacity, and perceived exposure to external constraints. In Sweden, stakeholders largely treated WTR as an actionable collective reform: the debate centered on sequencing, sectoral unevenness, and protecting less-organized groups, rather than on whether reduction is feasible in principle. This reflects a context in which collective bargaining, welfare provision, and employee-oriented flexibility make it more plausible to socialize risks and negotiate tradeoffs (Esping-Andersen 1990; Anttila et al. 2015). Germany appeared as an intermediate case in which WTR is imaginable but typically framed as conditional, evidence-dependent, and sectorally differentiated, aligning with a social-partnership pathway where pilots, measurement, and collective agreements mediate reform (Goerlich and Vis 2024). Latvia, by contrast, revealed how quickly WTR became entangled with insecurity: stakeholders were more likely to treat (high) working times as a survival imperative under lower wages, labor shortages, weaker intermediary institutions, fragile service capacity, and more exposure to geopolitical and economic risk. In this sense, WTR functions as a diagnostic policy; it reveals where societies can translate support for well-being into coordinated redistribution of time, and where the social and institutional

preconditions for doing so are missing. WTR debates in Europe are not only nationally differentiated but globally situated (Gerold et al. 2023; Kallis et al. 2013).

Taken together, WTR remains simultaneously compelling and fragile as a policy goal. It is compelling because it targets a key hinge of the "capitalocene" (Moore 2015): the organization of social life around abstract labor time and the treadmill dynamics that bind well-being to growth, speed, and commodified consumption (Schnaiberg 1980; Postone 1993). As such, WTR can function as a bridge policy that helps decouple well-being from throughput and opens political space to revalue what counts as socially necessary work and time in Europe's 1.5 °C transition (Gerold et al. 2023; Kallis et al. 2013). Yet WTR is fragile because the capacity to loosen the commodification of time is highly uneven and conditional. Its feasibility depends on welfare-state capacity, collective governance, distributional safeguards, and coordination beyond the nation-state. Without parallel measures to address ecologically unequal exchange and global labor hierarchies, WTR risks operating as a privileged form of temporal freedom for some, sustained by the continued externalization, intensification, and under-valuation of labor and nature elsewhere in the world economy (Althouse et al. 2023; Brand and Wissen 2025; Hickel et al. 2024). Importantly, since we collected the data in 2023–2024, deindustrialization processes have sharpened in Europe (Mayr et al. 2026). This is especially true in Germany, where these processes have intensified in key sectors of the "center of the center" core economy. Delayed transition, slower technological uptake, and competition from China are now likely to create serious problems for welfare funding (Leusder 2026). Whether these processes will lead to increasing precarity, inequality, and the intensification of work-hours, or instead open space for solidaristic forms of worktime redistribution, depends on how German and European policymakers respond to deindustrialization: wage suppression, austerity, and welfare retrenchment, or coordinated industrial, social, and WTR policies capable of protecting livelihoods while managing structural transition.

This study had several limitations that also indicate avenues for future research. The number of participants was relatively small, and the findings are not statistically generalizable or representative of national stakeholder fields. Rather than assessing the prevalence of views, the analysis captures informed expert reasoning on the desirability, feasibility, and governance of WTR across different non-representative national contexts. These limitations highlight the need for further research on the conditions under which WTR can be realized in different country contexts, as well as the evolving geopolitical landscape. In particular, future studies should examine how welfare-regime characteristics, institutional capacity, and core-periphery dynamics shape the political feasibility and implementation pathways of WTR. Additionally, further studies are urgently needed on the implications of AI and other technological developments for WTR.

Notes

1. While average working hours in Europe have declined since the COVID-19 crisis, total hours worked have recovered – this reflects reduced hours within worker groups, not compositional shifts toward lower-hours jobs or workers. The pattern is largely driven by a decline in desired hours, for example, among young men with children, and others (Astinova et al. 2024).
2. The term "housewifization" refers to the naturalization and devaluing of reproductive work and its allocation to women (whether they are housewives or not) as part of recurrent reproductive crises inherent to capitalist accumulation. (Bohle and Vukov 2025).
3. We follow the analyses of Bruszt and Vukov (2024), Melegh (2017), Artner (2018), and Patočka et al. (2024) in positioning Sweden and Germany as "core economies" in Europe, with Greater structural security vis-à-vis "periphery" or "semi-periphery" countries such as Latvia. Nevertheless, this categorization requires nuance given the shifting global geoeconomic landscape, where Europe is increasingly described as lagging in several strategic sectors, while parts of Asia, particularly China, are experiencing growing economic dynamism and industrial leadership (Mayr et al. 2026). While we focus on a European perspective, this notion of "core economies" is also evolving globally. We collected the data in 2023–2024, while the global economic context has shifted rapidly. We note that Swedish and German discussions reflected greater stability amid external pressures and global market disruptions. However, these perceptions of stability may have since shifted among German and Swedish participants, particularly amid current debates on European competitiveness and strategic autonomy.

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Appendix A. STL solutions – thinking lab schedule and methods used

This thinking lab was based on six moderated three-person discussions (trialogues or three-person focus groups), each focusing on different impactful changes toward the 1.5 °C goal. The three people had relevant expert backgrounds, but came from different sectors. Refer to the participant list for the trialogues focusing on housing sufficiency (i.e., upper limit for residential floor space) below, in Table SF1/6.

The trialogues were either carried out online or in person, but followed the same methodology. In the context of each of the trialogues/topics, we addressed cross-cutting issues to deepen comprehensive insights, including:

- Structural barriers to and enablers of change (e.g., overcoming economic growth paradigms and hegemonic discourses, addressing vested interests, addressing rebound effects and their mitigation, implementing an eco-social welfare system);
- Immediate steps to take and long-term strategies for change;
- Actors responsible for change (e.g., policy-makers, businesses, households, civil society actors) and relevant - established or new - actor coalitions, including actor-specific barriers to and enablers of change;

Moderators facilitated the collaborative exchange between stakeholders using a trialogue discussion guideline (see below) to ensure discussions covered all relevant aspects. This standardization enabled meaningful comparisons of insights and findings. Each session was planned to last 120 to 180 min to allow for in-depth exploration and exchange.

For source and further information on methodology, see Mamut et al. (2025).

Appendix B. Trialogue discussion guideline

1. **Introduction**
   - Welcome and tour-de-table.
   - Purpose of the dialogue (EU1.5° Lifestyles Project rationale, purpose of the STL2, purpose of this particular dialogue, introduction to its topic and policy option/objective).
   - Reference to signed Consent Forms and Chatham House Rule (information can only be shared from this setting in a form that is anonymized and presented in an abstract manner).
   - Start with an introductory question: What is your personal concern for being here today?
2. **Next steps and possible policy strategies**
   - What would be the key next actions to pursue the [Policy Option and Objective]?
   - Is there a particular sequence or mix of actions and steps toward them to consider (i.e., a policy framework or political strategy)?
3. **Barriers and Enablers specific to Policy Option/Objective**
   - What are the primary barriers that could hinder achieving the [Policy Option and Objective]?
   - What are the key enablers that could facilitate the successful realization of (Policy Option and Objective)?

Moderator's Note: Should the discussion not organically touch upon narratives, vested interests, and the rebound effect, please actively inquire about their roles as potential barriers or enablers in this context.

4. **Responsible Actor(s)**
   - Who would need to be significantly involved* in creating these prerequisites (said steps and policy measures) or take the lead? *also includes the actor groups who are affected by these steps and measures.
   - Follow-up questions: What are YOU (as an organization/institution in this field) currently doing to achieve [Policy Option and Objective]? What is working well and/or not so well, and what barriers are you facing?
5. **Coalition Building**
   - What coalitions of actors would be needed to implement these steps and policy measures successfully?
   - In which coalitions of actors would you like to be involved? Which coalitions of actors do you consider particularly useful?
   - What can WE (the organizations and institutions participating in the dialogue) do together to get closer to the goal?
6. **Closing Round and Identifying the Essence**
   - Is there anything you feel we've missed or should explore further in future discussions?
   - Final reflections, further steps, closing the discussion.