EUROPEAN ENERGY AND CLIMATE POLICY AHEAD OF THE 2024 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

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TEPSA COMMENTARY
04/2024

As European Parliament elections approach, climate change and the energy transition appear to have lost the centrality in public debate that they had acquired around the previous round in 2019. At the time, spurred also by the mobilisation of civil society and youth groups such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, numerous parties and politicians from the centre-right to the left side of the political spectrum had made the fight against climate change the most salient issue of their campaigning. Current President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced that she would pursue a European Green Deal, a promise that was followed up by concrete policies shortly after her appointment.

Five years on, tackling climate change has only become more urgent, as shown by the continuous and ever intensifying emergencies – droughts throughout Southern Europe, largely above-average temperatures in both winter and summer, extensive forest fires, heat waves, floods and lack of snow from the Pyrenees to the Appennines, to cite some of the most recurrent phenomena. Yet, what often makes the headlines nowadays are protests against green politics and climate action. "Greenlash", a backlash against climate policies, has taken centre stage and is driving the narratives of not only far-right parties, but increasingly also the political mainstream in the European Union (EU). Planned measures went too far – the narrative goes – and have not (fully) taken into account the well-being of European citizens, particularly in the current context of rising energy prices and economic insecurity. Due to both exogenous factors (the Russo-Ukrainian war, escalation in the Middle East) and political expediency, the discursive focus of European political leaders has turned to other issues, such as building up defence capabilities or fighting migration. How did we get here, and what is the status and outlook of the energy transition in the EU?

In a new book, I analyse recent developments in EU energy and climate policy, how they relate to previous policy and their impact on the EU's path to climate neutrality by 2050. I attempt to provide an understanding of current and upcoming EU policy by reflecting on four central themes: conceptual and theoretical approaches to investigating European energy policy; the complex relationship between European energy security and the climate agenda; the rise and fall of EU–Russia energy relations; and Europe's role in the global energy transition.

While the EU used to be described as a liberal actor relying on norms, trade, and interdependence, a more realist discourse on EU energy security has now taken hold. Its focus on military and political control of strategic energy resources, as well as risks inherent in interdependences, has paved the way for a growing securitisation of energy flows and infrastructure. This process accelerated enormously following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As Russia was the EU's largest fossil fuel provider, and income from energy sales is critical to the Russian war effort, climate goals became entangled with the geopolitical priority of cutting energy dependence on Moscow. Hence, the European Commission presented the REPowerEU Plan, aiming to drastically reduce oil and gas imports from Russia, increase imports from other countries and accelerate the deployment of renewable energy and energy efficiency measures.

Growing tensions between the West - the United States in particular - and China have posed another major challenge to the EU and its low-carbon energy policy. The crisis with Russia and tensions with China have stimulated the EU to ramp up domestic production and deployment of renewable technologies. The concept of strategic autonomy has taken hold also in green energy policy, as shown by the recent focus of the

EU's Green Deal Industrial Plan on boosting domestic production of critical raw materials and net-zero technologies. However, geopolitical tensions have also induced the Union to seek alternative fossil fuel providers and invest in related infrastructure, such as new liquefied natural gas terminals, and temporarily increase coal consumption. New investments in fossil fuels run against the logic of a low-carbon energy transition and increase the risk of carbon lock-in.

While recent EU documents – from the 2021 Global Gateway onward – advocate energy cooperation with "like-minded" countries, policies driven by geopolitical competition can in fact complicate even these partnerships. The long controversy around the United States' Inflation Reduction Act, which has been criticised for drawing green energy investments away from Europe, is the best example in this respect. In other cases, the concept of "like-minded" country appears to have been stretched well beyond the EU's normative foundations, as shown by the energy partnerships with authoritarian states such as Azerbaijan and Qatar.

Meanwhile, worsening relations with Beijing could lead to disruptions in the supply of critical minerals and rare earths and to rising costs for renewable technologies – fields where China is a leader. Moreover, geopolitical competition undermines the multilateral cooperation that is necessary to advance climate action and low carbon transitions globally. The risk is that decarbonisation will only progress at a slower pace in clubs of richer states that control finance and advanced technology, while competitors and poorer countries are excluded from the required technologies and relegated to the role of providers of raw materials and cheap labour. Indeed, while being ambitious and striving for climate neutrality by 2050, EU energy policy often betrays an inclination to consider the Global South as a reluctant latecomer in low-carbon transitions, whose primary role is to cater for the decarbonisation targets of the Global North. Against this background, EU policies that are intended to prevent carbon leakage, most notably the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, may feed external perceptions of the Union as a self-interested, protectionist bloc.

Overall, the book highlights the rapid changes that are taking place in EU energy policy, most notably the decoupling from Russian energy supplies – after approximately half a century of growing energy trade – and the swift acceleration in deployment of renewable energy and energy efficiency measures. It shows how these developments are entangled with geopolitical factors and domestic challenges. Furthermore, it provides an assessment of the EU's ambition to be a leader in climate action and the energy transition. While the EU continues to have some of the most ambitious policies in these fields, its declared goal of being a global climate leader largely depends on how it will navigate growing geopolitical tensions and build bridges on an equal footing to ensure that the energy transition progresses beyond the EU's borders.

For further reading, see M. Siddi, European Energy Politics: The Green Transition and EU–Russia Energy Relations (Edward Elgar, 2023)

Editing and formatting: Allegra Wirmer (TEPSA).

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