

Study Guide - Week 23

European Council - Resource Security in Times of War

1) TLDR:

The EU's energy policy evolved from shared coal and steel management into a complex system balancing markets, climate goals, and geopolitical risks. While the EU has built an integrated energy market and is pushing toward renewables under the European Green Deal, it remains heavily dependent on external energy sources. Recent crises (especially the 2022 Ukraine war) have forced the EU to rethink its reliance on foreign suppliers while accelerating the transition to cleaner energy.

2) Background:

Today's European Union dates back to 1951 with the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community. Its goal was to coordinate production of such materials by European economies in order to not only rebuild their economies after the devastation of the Second World War, but also to prevent future such conflicts by integrating these strategic industries. In doing so, energy production also became a supporting pillar of stability and development on the European continent.

And yet, as the ECSC evolved into the European Economic Community, the energy policies of member-states were still unique. France, for example, prioritized its nuclear powerplants, while Germany relied more on coal and natural gas. Soon, the effects of the creation of a single European market in the 1990s would extend to the energy sector as well, breaking up national monopolies and allowing for cross-border electricity trade. Connecting states' energy grids was the first step in improving European energy security.

Entering the 21st century, Europe (as a whole) began relying more on imported fuels - primarily from Russia. In 2005, days before the end of his term, Germany's Chancellor Gerhard Schröder signed a deal with Russia to build the Nord Stream 1 pipeline. Further projects between EU member-states and the Federation include South Stream (Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece, Italy) and Blue Stream (Bulgaria, Romania). Russian gas was also transported via Belarus and Ukraine - but the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea caused a supply shock: as shipments to the latter were temporarily halted, 15% of Europe's gas demand could not be met.

Geopolitical crises clearly demonstrated Russia's influence on the European energy sector. As a response, the Union pursued an ambitious project to break free. Thus, the "European Green Deal" was born: with a mandate to make Europe climate-neutral by 2050. Its goals included the massive expansion of its renewable energy generation capabilities, the further electrification of existing industries and transport services, eventually reducing its dependence on fossil fuels. If one would consider the European Green Deal as a "passive" measure, then the Russian invasion of Ukraine would most definitely act as the wake-up call. In the following months, member-states partially banned Russian imports and sought to diversify with the help of Norway, Qatar and the United States through the supplementary REPowerEU plan. The plan also increased storage facility requirements to ensure that there would be energy security during the winter season, as well as establishing a "joint energy platform" to allow for member-states to jointly purchase fuel.

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as the American blockade of the Strait of Hormuz have served to embolden European lawmakers in further pursuing these goals. At this meeting, European leaders must ask themselves: how will the Union continue pursuing its energy objective?

3) Key Issues:

3.1) The transition to renewables

What started once as the European Coal and Steel Community, has evolved to be an organisation, viewed as a world leader in climate policy. And yet, with its 71-year history of cooperation and development, it is still internally divided into East and West due to the economic disparity in the two regions. Due to this, a unified approach would be one of the main issues to discuss in this session. Eastern European nations, for example, argue that this transition is enforced on them, while Western European nations have underscored the necessity to transition as soon as possible. Furthermore, the funding of the Green Deal primarily comes from Western Europe, which has come under fire by leaders of right-wing parties in those nations. Should the Union pursue a unified energy transition plan? Or should it set guidelines for each individual nation to follow? How should the Union act in order to comply with states' sovereignty?

3.2.) Tackling foreign influence

The European Union is a strongly pro-Western organization, closely allied with the United States. For long, it has enjoyed a fruitful relationship with that country. However, the first and second presidencies of Donald Trump have shaken up the warm relations due to his stance on trade. Furthermore, Trump has condemned the EU's "green scam" and has vowed to act accordingly, further threatening the relationship between the two countries. How can the Union proceed with its plans while maintaining a friendship with its friend across the pond? What parts, if any, of the plan can be altered to appease Trump? Or, if that is not desired, what steps can the Union take to safeguard itself against potential American retaliation?

4) The European Council: concept, functions and the decision-making process actually do?

The European Council is one of the seven principal institutions of the European Union. It is composed of the heads of state of the 27 EU member-states plus the non-voting President of the European Council (Antonio Costa) and the President of the European Commission (Ursula von der Leyen). While it has no legislative power, it acts as counsel to the Commission in providing policy guidance.

Similar to the United Nations, the Council drafts a resolution, which is referred to as a "Conclusion". Due to the Council's nature, its contents are only politically binding, not legally. For a Conclusion to be approved, it needs to be approved without any objections by any of the 27 national leaders.

5) Major Stakeholders

5.1) Germany

Representing Europe's largest economy, Chancellor Friedrich Merz will most certainly be a fitting figure to lead the debate. In the past, it has heavily relied on Russian gas. With the resurgence of war in Ukraine, it rapidly replaced this supply. Considering its large industry, which seeks to buy cheap energy, Germany is troubled between an economically expensive transition or importing and reducing its energy sovereignty. Merz will support EU-wide renewable investments, as well as policies that will protect its industry.

5.2) France

France has long promoted its nuclear power capabilities, even to the extent of supplying Germany with it, much to the displeasure of the citizens of the latter. As a result, a heavy debate is expected between the two countries on the future of green energy and the dominance of either nuclear or renewables. Macron will advocate for more EU investments in nuclear infrastructure and will oppose any efforts to disadvantage it.

5.3) Spain

Thanks to its geography, Spain is a leading country in solar energy production. However, there are difficulties in exporting it, primarily because of its limited interconnection with Europe. Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez' task is to resolve this problem and to coerce the Council to fund the construction of better solar infrastructure in order to provide a steady supply of such. Still, he might face scrutiny about the legitimacy of solar power due to the 2025 blackout.

5.4) Poland

Poland is a country, which still heavily relies on coal. As such, Prime Minister Donald Tusk - a former President of this Council - will resist a rapid decarbonization plan that would deeply harm its economy. Tusk is particularly strong on the EU's foreign and military policies, considering those to be a higher priority to the transition. Still, he does not oppose climate protection, but he believes in Europe's ability to compete with China and the United States.

5.5) Hungary

Orbán was a major blockade for the Council on the Green Deal. Now, with him out of office, Peter Magyar seeks to restore relations with Europe and to cooperate with them. However, his agreement with the Council is not guaranteed, as he also seeks to defend Hungary's national interests. After all, his voter base was mostly conservatives fed up with his predecessors. Overall, Magyar seeks to negotiate with Europe more, rather than outright vetoing solutions.

Sources and Further Reading

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