



## Perspective

## European energy politics after Ukraine: The road ahead

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## ABSTRACT

By invading Ukraine and weaponizing its gas supplies to Europe, Russia has made natural gas what renewable energy used to be: unreliable and expensive. In this perspective, we use the paradigm shift concept developed by Florian Kern et al. to unpack the possible implications of the war for the European energy politics. We argue that the war and the uncertainty around natural gas it has produced will play a major role in the future development of the European energy transition. Reducing energy vulnerability and faster decarbonization will be pursued as the main policy goals, probably at the expense of the further development of the EU integrated energy market under its current design. We may also see more Europe and more state in the energy affairs as solutions to the crisis require levels of coordination and resource mobilization that individual member states or private actors cannot provide. We conclude that the EU has the resources, knowledge base, and determination to turn the crisis into an opportunity. If uncoordinated or mismanaged, however, the European response might make the matters even worse, triggering a political crisis and eventually also a crisis of legitimacy.

## 1. Introduction

The war on Ukraine presents the EU's dependency on Russian energy with a massive challenge. Between February 2021 and 2022, the price of natural gas rose from 20 to 80 €/MWh, with surges as high as 180 €/MWh, driving up electricity prices too [1]. Gazprom has stopped supplies to Poland, Bulgaria, and Finland, and the transit routes through Poland and Ukraine are being phased out [2]. Industry warns of a collapse and economic recession, and energy prices are pushing an unprecedented number of households into poverty [3]. The import embargo on Russian oil is dividing the EU [4], and the European public is frustrated that its fossil fuel payments are financing the Russian war machine. Once again, energy geopolitics is making the headlines.

The challenges associated with the war and the collapse of trust between the EU and Russia are increasingly difficult to meet using standard diplomatic, financial, regulatory, and legislative tools established within European energy politics. It may well be the case that the crisis will trigger a major change in the way Europeans approach, practice, and even understand energy policy.

In this short perspective, we discuss the ongoing changes in the European energy policy paradigm, other changes that are likely to occur, and what they might mean down the road. While opinion-like

contributions in this journal are usually light on theory [5,6], we find it helpful to structure our thoughts along the paradigm shift framework developed by Kern et al. [7]. Their approach enables us to contextualize the crisis and zoom out to see its wider implications for European energy politics.

## 2. About policy change

Policy change has been theorized within diverse streams of literature, such as the advocacy coalition framework [8], multiple streams approach [9], or punctuated-equilibrium theory [10], while literature discussing changes within and of *policy paradigms* address essentially the same phenomenon more broadly [11]. A policy paradigm can be understood as a shared, value-based perception of reality that guides the selection of practical actions and solutions [12]. Hall argues that policy change typically occurs within a paradigm through either incremental adjustment of existing policy instruments or via the introduction of new ones. Changes of paradigms are less frequent and considerably more difficult to identify [13].

Kern et al. argue that paradigms consist of four interconnected levels and paradigm shifts occur when fundamental changes take place across all four at once. These levels are summarized in Table 1.

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**Table 1**  
The policy paradigm levels.

Paradigm level	Description or key question
Interpretive framework	Ideas about the subject and how it should be governed
Policy goals	What should be pursued?
Policy instruments	Through which means?
Governance institutions	Through which political structures?

Source: [7].

While it is too early to assess whether the war will trigger a paradigm shift in European energy politics, ongoing changes across the four levels can be discussed and evaluated. In this perspective, we use Kern's framework to structure how we make sense of these changes.

### 3. The road ahead

#### 3.1. Interpretive framework: securitization of fossil fuels and rebranding of renewable energy

*“Our food, our energy, our defense are all issues of sovereignty.”*

Emmanuel Macron, President of France [14]

At times of crisis, it is easier for policy-makers to argue that existing policies are obsolete and new ones need to be adopted [7]. Building on the work of Blyth [15], among others, Kern et al. argue that crises are not “self-apparent phenomena” but rather events that need to be made sense of [7]. We expect that the emerging understanding of the current crisis will imply mainly securitization of energy supply and a change in the perception of energy sources.

Securitization assumes framing a political issue as a security issue. If accepted by the target audience (e.g., European policy-makers and the public), such framing enables the use of extra-ordinary measures to address the problem [16]. While securitization is not always easy to pin down [17], and telling it apart from mere use of security jargon may be especially difficult [18], the energy securitization literature holds that securitization occurs at times of crises when stakes are high [19,20]. Echoing the energy crises of the 1970s, late 2000s, and 2014, we at the very least expect the war to bring more emphasis on security in Europe's energy politics [6,21,22]. It will likely trigger all sorts of attempts to “properly” securitize energy and thus justify undertaking “extraordinary measures” [18], such as changes in competencies within European energy governance or stretching the boundaries of existing norms and rules.

*“Because of what's happening in Russia, there are no taboos in the choices member states can make.”*

Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice President of the European Commission for the European Green Deal [23]

Alongside securitization attempts, the war may cause a change in perception of energy sources and other components of the energy system. Unlike the previous energy crisis in Europe, brought on in the late 2000s by oil scarcity and two gas disputes between Russia and Ukraine [7], viable long-term solutions to the current crisis will be understood less in terms of measures to increase liquidity on fossil fuels markets [22] and more via a bullish approach towards decarbonization. While diversified gas supply may be perceived as a short-term solution, energy efficiency, renewable energy and electrical mobility will cease to be mere climate change mitigation tools or lifestyle choices but also essential tools for national security.

*“Renewable energy is the energy of freedom.”*

Christian Lindner, German Minister of Finance [24]

In countries, where political elites have traditionally been reluctant to commit to a RES-driven decarbonization, e.g. Czechia or Poland [25,26], the war will strengthen pro-RES voices and possibly allow for a similar re-branding of renewable energy as occurred during the late 2000s when the European Commission alongside some—typically west-European—countries came to perceive renewable energy as an energy independence measure [22,27].

In countries already committed to renewable energy sources, the war will likely result in a doubling-down. The more the public accepts the security framing or becomes horrified by eventual war atrocities, the more receptive it will be to a change in the rules governing the energy system. This may, for example, allow policy-makers to mandate stricter energy savings requirements (such as new speed limits) or relax the permitting of new energy infrastructure. It will also make it easier for developers to get their projects funded and, above all, locally accepted [28]. The sound of a windmill in the morning may suddenly sound like victory.

#### 3.2. Policy goals: a new balance in the energy trilemma

The issue of security of supply, traditionally understood in a geopolitical sense, has become closely entangled with the question of affordability of energy, with both objectives to be achieved simultaneously through the development of the integrated energy market [29,30]. At the same time, renewable energy has emerged as the leading solution to the sustainability issue, and the question of making renewable energy and the integrated energy market (including relevant infrastructure) compatible with one another has emerged as the main energy policy challenge for the Union.

The energy affordability crisis that hit Europe in the fall of 2021 and the looming gas availability crisis are unlikely to completely redefine the goals of the EU. The Union will continue pursuing decarbonization while keeping an eye on affordability and security of supply. At least in the short term, however, the need to reduce energy vulnerability will affect how these concepts are understood. Domestically, this will be associated with strengthening the link between energy policy and social policy, while at the level of external policy we will see a closer entanglement of energy and security policies [31].

##### 3.2.1. Social policy: the distribution of adjustment costs

Europe's ability to handle the ongoing energy and security crises will be critically dependent on how the costs of adjustment measures are distributed and (consequently) on public support of the respective adjustment policies. The EU already has significantly higher energy prices than comparable economies, with the solitary exception of energy resources-poor Japan [32]. This undermines the competitiveness of European industries and puts households at risk of energy poverty, which has been difficult to address [33] despite the issue's salience, affecting 31–50 million Europeans [34,35].

Adjusting to the new situation may bring short-term pain [36]. The longer the gas price remains high and the faster the Russian supplies will need to be replaced, the higher the costs European economies will incur. Europe will need to adjust the rules of the system to prevent large-scale impoverishment which would otherwise result from the ongoing rerouting of stocks and flows of energy and finance. Importantly, there are tools to achieve this, with energy efficiency in the housing sector being a prime example [37]. Savings in heat consumption will make it easier to replace fossil fuels in the heat industry and lead to a long-term stabilization of heating prices, one of the main causes of energy poverty [38].

Failure to mobilize sufficient political, financial, and corporate resources can easily lead to the impoverishment of large segments of the European population. Such dire consequences may call into question the

legitimacy of the EU over energy policy-making [39] and perhaps even the very idea of a united Europe as well as public trust in national political institutions [40]. Many populist political leaders in Europe are willing to capitalize on such a fallout [41].

### 3.2.2. Security policy: re-thinking supply partnerships and turning Russia into North Korea

The uncertainty on energy markets and hostile behavior by the key energy supplier will leave a mark on how Europe sources its energy. On the one hand, a scramble for available gas can be expected, especially in the short term. On the other hand, more attention will be paid to the security and dependence dimensions of eventual new partnerships. Early negotiations between European countries and Qatar show Europe's significant reluctance to long-term import commitments [42]—a position that just a year ago would have been driven solely by climate concerns but today contains a strong security component as well.

A reexamination of supply partnerships for energy transition materials and technologies can also be expected. The reemergence of energy geopolitics will feed into the COVID-triggered supply chain crisis and incentivize regionalization. Initiatives to take more control over renewable energy and electrical mobility supply chains, which are already visible [43], will likely intensify.

Energy relations with Russia will remain at the core of European energy security policy but will undergo a significant development. If the conflict drags on and European military assistance to Ukraine intensifies, Russia might cut off Europe (or a substantial part thereof) completely from its supply, thereby removing itself from the equation and imposing substantial adjustment costs on Europe. In Europe, phasing Russian energy supply out fast will be the new base case scenario for most European energy planners since few European countries and businesses can be expected to keep close ties to Russia and remain exposed to the consequences of the war longer than necessary.

The pace of this phase-out will be determined by availability and affordability concerns, but it will also be affected by the intensity of the conflict, the scale of atrocities perpetrated by the Russian military against Ukrainian civilians, and the perceived threat that the Russian aggression poses to Europe.

*“We need to stop [the financial] flows that allow [the Russians] to finance the war.”*

Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy [44]

If the conflict escalates further or if Russia directly threatens Europe, the Europeans could pursue a deeper defunding of Russia's military capabilities. Since Russia can access eastern markets directly [45] and take advantage of the fungibility of LNG and oil [46], the only option to do that will be to crush demand. In such case, Europe will need to mobilize its climate policy networks [47] to scale up investment in non-fossil energy system components and develop technological, financial, and regulatory pathways to integrate them. Doing so will speed up the emergent feedback loops that will eventually displace fossil fuels altogether.

This idea may seem far-fetched, but consider this: over the past 30 years, Russia has started a war or intervened in one every five to eight years. If Europe can speed up the global phase-out of oil by, say, a decade, it can defund the Russian military a decade sooner and make one or two such wars—let alone a major aggression towards Europe—a little less likely.

Naturally, Russia will continue exporting its primary resources and oil and gas will remain important feedstocks in industrial production. But very much like salt and spices when they ceased to be useful for food conservation, hydrocarbons will become significantly less important to

our militaries and economies [48]. Consequently, their value will decline and so will the revenues they provide to the remaining exporters. It is not implausible that Russia will then become like North Korea: a country that the international community must take seriously because of its nuclear capabilities but one that lacks the economic and military power to expand outside its borders.

### 3.3. Policy instruments: fit for a redesign?

At the moment, political and public attention is focused on the attractive energy stories of the REPowerEU plan, increasing pressure for decarbonization, and strategies to move away from Russian energy. Alas, less attention is being paid to the unfolding, more technical debate about the future architecture of EU gas and electricity markets. These markets represent the backbone of the European energy sector, and the war, accompanied by high prices and a growing physical shortage of gas, has aggravated the long-term debate about their future [49].

To ensure sufficient supply for the 2022–2023 heating and industrial season and to tame energy prices, the European Commission has endorsed a series of short- and long-term measures: a mandatory gas storage obligation, certification of storage system operators [50], common gas purchases [51], and relaxation of rules on market intervention [52]. As radical as these steps are, however, they are still in line with the existing regulatory framework of EU energy markets.

However, should gas prices remain high and future of supplies uncertain, the pressure to decouple the price of electricity from that of gas will grow. We are already seeing the first signs of European countries trying to deal with the pricing role of gas in electricity in a regulatory manner [53]. Furthermore, if the conflict renders gas too expensive or its supply outright restricted, the electricity market will lose a significant source of flexibility. Balancing renewable energy will need to be done by different means such as battery storage or demand response, which may require adjustments in the pricing system. This will only add to the pressure that the European electricity market design already faces from renewables support schemes and capacity remuneration mechanisms, among other things [54].

The first serious proposals for a major overhaul of the EU common market in electricity in particular are already emerging [55] in response to expert and political demand [56,57]. The proponents of reform stress the absurdity of a situation where the price of increasingly decarbonized electricity is determined by the shrinking share of fossil fuels. Opponents, on the other hand, argue that the current situation of extreme prices is a short-term exception that markets can overcome and that the EU common energy markets are the very tool for efficiently managing Europe's energy sector even in a decarbonized future [58]. This debate will be extremely difficult for the EU as an institution, as it has already invested a huge amount of political capital and effort in the existing legal, regulatory, and financial architecture, but also for Member States, who will have to weigh the enormous costs of change against the mounting costs of inaction.

### 3.4. Governance institutions: towards more Europe?

For decades, EU energy politics has been defined by the question of competences: should it be the EU or the member states who decide about energy policy? Article 194 TFEU includes energy among the shared competences of national and supranational authorities [59], but disputes over decision-making between the EU institutions and national governments have never faded away.

Russia's war has reopened this question, as every crisis is a window of opportunity for EU political actors to seize more power. We saw this during the first oil crisis of 1973–1974, when François-Xavier Ortoli's European Commission failed to assert itself vis-à-vis the member states. As a result, the gradual strengthening of the European Commission's position came to an abrupt halt and decision-making powers largely returned to the level of national governments [60], who clearly

dominated European energy policy-making until the mid-1990s.

Today's situation is different. Neither Emmanuel Macron nor Olaf Scholz are yet willing or able to embrace the leadership naturally expected of their countries [61]. The policy of the former is more active, systematic and pragmatic and its long-term goal seems to be to make the EU more efficient and more independent from the US in military and security terms. However, the limited and classified French military aid to Ukraine, together with a mode of communication that is often perceived as an appeasement of Russia, is severely undermining confidence in France, at least in the eastern part of the EU [62].

Chancellor Scholz's policy is confusing even for the Germans themselves [63]. Despite a clear parliamentary resolution, the government is largely refraining from directly supplying any heavy weapons to Ukraine and is limiting itself to non-military aid or military assistance through third countries [64]. The Chancellor's communication is often criticized for its ambiguity and what is often portrayed as "absurd pacifism". The EU's hegemon is attacked from all sides for its lack of a clear and decisive position and unwillingness to make sacrifices—a position so different from the financial crisis of 2008 when Germany imposed harsh and painful austerity measures on some other EU states [65,66].

In contrast, the UK has made its position clear and understandable and supports it materially. However, the UK's leadership is weakened by Brexit, so the cabinet must make do with proposals for alternative organizations and alliances outside the EU platform [67].

In this power vacuum, the initiative shifts to von der Leyen and her Commission, which is assertively enforcing energy sanctions, coordinating the transition away from Russian energy through REPowerEU and other new policies, developing cooperation on gas supplies with third countries, and managing the EU finances that will be needed for all these steps. But even the Commission has already encountered a backlash. On 4 May 2022, von der Leyen announced a plan for an EU oil embargo, which took about a month to enforce. It finally passed in a much softer form and only after massive concessions to the opportunistic Hungary, which blocked the EU decision-making process [68]. Moreover, unlike the European Commission, more and more Member States are signaling their unwillingness to continue with further sanctions [69]. It is therefore unclear to what extent the European Commission will be able to maintain and possibly formalize its current leadership.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

In what is likely to become one of the defining moments of European history, the fate of Europe's energy transition will be decided in the suburbs of Ukrainian cities. As the conflict drags on, the future of natural gas—the fossil fuel long envisaged to facilitate the end of fossil fuels—remains a big unknown. The road ahead may meander to a mere reduction in sensitivity to potential Russian energy supply cut-offs, or it may veer more sharply toward a paradigm shift.

This perspective presents the possible range of changes in EU energy politics across the four policy paradigm levels defined by Kern et al. [7]. At the interpretive framework level, it highlights the potential scope and impact of securitization of Russian fossil fuels. In an extreme case, the securitization of Russian fossil fuel supplies could lead to an emphasis on reducing (energy) vulnerability over other principles of European energy policy. At the level of policy objectives, we have pointed to the creation of two new European energy objectives—strengthening the link between energy and social policies and redefining Russia's role in European energy diplomacy. At the level of policy instruments we discussed the possibility of a complete overhaul of the architecture of EU energy markets, and at the level of institutions we highlighted a possible shift towards further supranationalization of EU energy policy. At all levels, we see the potential for systemic shifts. If confirmed, such shifts could lead to a fundamental transformation of the EU's energy system and the role that Russian supplies play therein.

While the exact scope of the transformation is impossible to predict, changes are certainly going to come. Some of the assumptions

previously held about energy cooperation with Russia and the role of natural gas in the energy transition are no longer valid [70,71]. Rather paradoxically, the Russians have managed to make natural gas what renewable energy used to be: expensive and unreliable [72]. Combined with ethical concerns over the use of Russian energy sources, the new geopolitical unreliability of gas has redefined the energy policy trilemma in Europe. Fossil fuels have finally lost their edge in all three of its tenets: Already long considered environmentally unsustainable, fossil fuels are no longer even competitive to renewable energy and the current securitization of Russian imports compromises their contribution to security of energy supply. Energy politics in Europe suddenly seems less divided. Climate activists and energy policy conservatives alike agree that renewable energy—the "clean energy of freedom"—and energy conservation measures should now be the way forward [73,74].

The eventual phase-out of Russian energy imports will be an enormous challenge [75], but Europe does not face it unprepared. Unlike during the energy crises of the 1970s, Europe is used to commodity price fluctuations and supply cut-offs. Likewise, the EU has already been rebuilding its energy system for the second time in the past three decades: first to liberalize and integrate it, then to decarbonize it [76]. The lessons learnt throughout these efforts can reduce the uncertainty that surrounds the upcoming system adjustments. There is also a substantial body of research devoted to all aspects of the transition away from fossil fuels [77–79]. Whole transition studies departments have emerged, and expertise has been created. The need to improvise is fairly limited this time around. What is more, the technologies Europe needs for transitioning away from fossil fuels already exist and are fully competitive [80]. Financial and regulatory tools such as renewable energy auctions have also been developed and put into practice. In short, the political consensus that has emerged over the past two decades about decarbonization can serve as the basis for phasing out Russian imports and speeding up the transition [81].

Of course, a change of this magnitude carries significant risks, the most serious relating to insufficient or mismanaged coordination [82]. The extreme prices of the winter of 2021–2022 provide a strong incentive for investment in fossil fuels. If left to the market, a lot of new oil, gas and coal infrastructure could be built over the coming years, leading to a dramatic increase in the costs of decarbonization [83]. Europe will need to find ways to eliminate the Russian gas supply lock-in without creating new ones. It will also be crucially important to have the costs of the transformation both distributed fairly and perceived as such. One of the greatest dangers of the current crisis is the social fallout created by energy price spikes. If Europe fails to prevent large sections of its populations from getting trapped in energy poverty, the crisis may easily spill over to a political crisis and eventually also to a crisis of legitimacy. The rise of populism and the centrifugal tendencies that followed the economic and refugee crises during the 2010s and resulted in Brexit must be avoided if Europe is to prevail.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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