



Weaponised Energy and Climate Change: Assessing Europe's Response to the Ukraine War

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RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has produced the biggest energy shock to Europe since the 1970s oil crises. It has also laid bare the strategic blunder at the heart of Europe's energy policy – its long-standing dependence on Russian supplies. With Moscow weaponising its dominant position in Europe's energy system, European leaders had little choice but to wean Europe off its addiction to cheap Russian gas and oil. This article explores the European Union's energy response to the war in Ukraine and its impact on climate policy. It addresses two questions: First, to what extent has Europe succeeded in reducing reliance on Russian fossil fuels, and at what cost? And second, how has the push for energy independence affected the continent's commitment to implementing the net zero transition? I argue that one year after the invasion, the EU's strategic decoupling from Russia has progressed to such an extent that Moscow is close to losing its energy stranglehold over Europe. Furthermore, although Europe's energy crisis is far from over, European leaders have renewed their commitment to the net zero climate agenda and accelerated investments in green energy. In the short run, the EU's pursuit of energy security may have temporarily set back its climate ambition. However, as Europe discovered by the end of 2022, decarbonisation is ultimately the best long-term strategy for energy security.

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Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 caused the biggest energy shock to Europe since the oil crises of the 1970s. Ever since, European leaders have been grappling with the need to reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels while softening the economic fallout from skyrocketing energy prices. Only a few weeks after the invasion, the European Union (EU) embarked on a comprehensive programme to reduce energy consumption, to replace Russian energy supplies, and to accelerate the green energy revolution. One year later, significant progress has been made in decoupling Europe's economy from cheap Russian energy. Europe has so far avoided a major energy crunch, but this has come at considerable cost. Inflation in 2022 soared above 10 percent while economic growth petered out.

The energy shock of 2022 has also turned into a moment of truth for Europe's climate policy ambition. To replace Russian energy with alternative supplies, European leaders decided to increase coal shipments from abroad while building new infrastructure for importing liquified natural gas (LNG). Both moves called into question the EU's repeatedly stated goal of accelerating the switch away from fossil fuels. Indeed, European greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions went up in the first six months of the war, mainly due to increased coal consumption. At the same time, however, European leaders reiterated their commitment to decarbonising the economy and presented the war also as an opportunity to advance energy and climate security.

This article examines Europe's energy and climate response to Russia's aggression and asks two questions: First, to what extent has the EU managed to counter Russia's weaponisation of Europe's energy dependence, and at what cost? And second, has Europe's drive for energy independence from Russia undermined or reinforced the continent's long-term climate strategy? It is worth noting that the answers to these questions reflect the experience of the first twelve months since Russia's invasion. They are therefore somewhat tentative, not least as the war in Ukraine looks set to drag on and the energy crisis is far from over. Nevertheless, early indications suggest that it has been possible to free Europe from Russia's energy blackmail without causing significant harm to the net zero transition. In fact, Europe's experience holds important lessons for other countries seeking to pursue energy security while pushing ahead with the net zero transition.

EUROPE'S STRATEGIC BLUNDER

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 exposed a major strategic miscalculation on the part of Europe. After the end of the cold war, many European countries allowed themselves to become dependent on Russia as their main supplier of fossil fuel energy, mostly natural gas but also oil and coal. 90 percent of the gas consumed in the EU was imported, of which around 45 percent was of Russian origin.¹ European governments justified the deepening energy dependence on Russia on both economic and political grounds. For one, a cheap and reliable energy supply was a critical ingredient in the success of the continent's export-oriented manufacturing industries. Moreover, the creation of a vast physical infrastructure for transporting Russian gas to the EU was seen as an investment in a stable, long-term relationship with Moscow. Germany, in particular, had made a "strategic bet on a full embrace of interdependence and globalization", as Constanze Stelzenmüller from the Brookings Institution put it [2]. 'Wandel durch Handel', the idea that the mutual gains from trade would have a transformative and pacifying effect on Russia, had been a mainstay of German foreign policy since the days of *Ostpolitik* [3].

Germany's, and indeed Europe's, strategic miscalculation is all the more troubling since various warning signs and opportunities to change course were missed. Long before Russia started to stoke secessionist tensions in Ukraine and used brute military force against its neighbour, foreign policy and energy experts had been warning that Europe's reliance on Russian energy was reaching problematic levels [4, 5]. In 2006 and 2009, disputes between Russia and Ukraine over outstanding debt and the pricing of Russian gas exports through Ukraine's territory led to temporary shutdowns of gas supplies to Europe. Both episodes could have led Europe to pull back from deepening energy ties with Russia. Instead, European countries further expanded the gas pipeline network to create new routes for Russian gas exports, not least to reduce dependence on Ukraine as the main transit territory.

1 In 2021, Russia also provided around 25% of oil imports and 45% of coal imports to EU [1].

Even after Moscow openly showed its revanchist ambition – when it annexed the Crimean Peninsula and supported secessionist uprisings in Ukraine’s Donbas region in 2014 – Europe failed to reverse course. Despite condemning Russia’s breach of international law, the German government continued to support the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, which was to send Russian gas directly to Germany. It also allowed the Russian energy firm Gazprom to strengthen its grip over domestic gas storage facilities. Instead of reviewing its energy strategy, Europe actually allowed dependence on Russia as a major supplier of natural gas to increase after 2014: Russian imports rose from 36 percent of EU gas consumption in 2015 to 41 percent in 2018, before reaching a new plateau of 38 percent in 2020 and 2021 [6]. Repeated appeals by the American government and US sanctions against the Russian firms involved in the construction of Nord Stream 2 had little impact. The new gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea was completed in September 2021, less than half a year before Russia attacked Ukraine.

It took Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine finally to force a strategic rethink. By this time, all remaining hope that energy cooperation with Russia could become the basis for a political accommodation with Putin’s regime had evaporated. In fact, Russia already started to weaponise its dominant position in Europe’s energy market well before the outbreak of hostilities. In 2021, Gazprom reduced the flow of gas through its pipeline network, running down gas reserves and driving up energy prices across Europe. Soon after the invasion, Russia further squeezed European gas supplies. By August 2022, gas prices had reached a record 300 €/MWh, compared to price levels of around 20 €/MWh in 2020. Europe’s economic growth came to a stuttering halt as inflation shot up and a cost-of-living crisis engulfed European societies [7].

European leaders thus had little choice but to seek to reduce Moscow’s stranglehold over Europe’s energy infrastructure. Following the outbreak of the war, the EU began itself to weaponise its position as the largest market for Russian energy exports. After imposing a ban on coal imports from Russia, effective from August 2022, the EU introduced an embargo on seaborne Russian oil imports starting in February 2023. Together with the US, other G7 countries and Australia, the EU also imposed an unprecedented price cap on Russian oil exports to other parts of the world. Step by step, Western powers have thus sought to starve Moscow of at least some of the energy revenues that have fuelled its war machine in Ukraine. The impact of such measures has been softened by other countries (China, India, Egypt, UAE, Turkey) that increased their energy imports from Russia, but there is clear evidence that thanks to Western sanctions and lost energy revenues, Moscow has had to withdraw large sums from its sovereign wealth fund to plug a growing budget hole [6, 8, 9].

Europe’s attempt to restructure its energy market and external trade raises two interrelated questions: First, to what extent has Europe managed to rid itself of its addiction to Russian energy imports, and at what cost? And second, how has this push for energy independence played into Europe’s long-standing goal of eliminating energy-related GHG emissions? Early on, the EU faced an inevitable trade-off between the strategic imperatives of energy independence and climate change. One year after the invasion, how well has Europe fared on these two fronts?

EUROPE’S PUSH FOR ENERGY INDEPENDENCE FROM RUSSIA

With the launch of the REPowerEU plan in May 2022, the EU embarked on a comprehensive programme to eliminate the continent’s dependence on Russian gas and make its energy system more resilient to external pressure. Time was of the essence, for the longer Europe relied on Russian energy imports the longer it helped finance the war in Ukraine. In the first six months of the conflict, Russia is estimated to have earned a total of €158 billion in revenues from fossil fuel exports, of which EU imports alone accounted for 54 percent, worth around €85 billion [8].

The EU’s plan sought to achieve a two-thirds reduction in gas consumption from Russian sources by the end of 2022. It also aimed to end the EU’s dependence on Russian energy exports while advancing its climate policy objectives. The measures that would deliver both objectives included an immediate focus on energy demand reduction, a diversification of energy supplies from abroad, and an accelerated push for renewable energy [10].

To contain the energy crisis, European governments had to take some politically controversial decisions early on: Germany, France, Austria, Italy and the Netherlands announced that they would extend or reactivate coal-fired power plants to replace Russian gas in electricity

generation. The German government also extended the lifetime of several nuclear power plants that were set to be decommissioned. At the same time, European governments rushed to secure alternative supplies of energy, mainly from North America, North Africa and the Middle East. Given the urgency of the task, European leaders could not be choosy about where to source new energy imports from, even if it meant entering into long-term energy deals with authoritarian regimes in the Middle East.

Replacing natural gas from Russia proved more difficult than replacing oil and coal. Building new pipelines to alternative gas sources normally takes years, and several key European countries lacked sufficient terminal and storage infrastructure for importing LNG. The speed with which European governments went about addressing these bottlenecks surprised many observers. Germany, which had no existing capacity to import LNG, decided to build several port terminals from scratch. Despite the country's reputation for lengthy and bureaucratic planning processes, the first such LNG terminal in Wilhelmshaven was completed in record time. Built in under 200 days, it started operating on 17 December 2022. Five more LNG terminals are still to follow [11].

Europe benefited from favourable global market conditions in 2022. Due to China's sluggish economy, Asian demand for gas shipments was relatively weak, making it easier for existing LNG capacity to be diverted to European customers, while gas imports through existing gas pipelines from Norway, Algeria and Azerbaijan could be kept at maximum levels. Furthermore, the United States had enough capacity to rapidly increase its energy exports to Europe. By the end of the year, American energy firms provided the continent with half of its LNG imports and 12 percent of oil supplies [6, 12].

To avert energy blackouts during the 2022–23 winter season, Europe could not rely on a gas replacement strategy alone, it also needed to curb energy demand across the continent. In August 2022, the EU called on Member States to set a target of 15 percent of total demand reduction for gas [13]. Companies were encouraged to find additional energy efficiencies in offices and factories, while households were advised to turn down thermostats in their homes and cut down on the use of air conditioning [14]. Although mostly voluntary in nature, these appeals eventually bore fruit. A combination of skyrocketing energy prices and solidarity with Ukraine proved to be enough of a motivating factor for firms and citizens to cut down their energy use. In fact, by early 2023, the EU managed to exceed its original savings target. In the six months from August 2022 to January 2023, gas consumption in the EU fell by 19.3 percent, compared with average consumption levels in the 2017–2022 period [15].

How much did Europe suffer economically from the weaponisation of energy in 2022? Early economic model calculations predicted a limited to moderate economic contraction in the EU mainly due to gas shortages, on a scale of 0.5 to 3 percent of GDP.² In the end, some industries found it relatively easy to reduce gas consumption without suffering any fall in manufacturing output, largely due to available options for improving efficiency and fuel switching. With global gas prices falling again in early 2023, fears of a protracted recession in Europe have gradually eased [16]. For some industrial sectors (e.g., chemicals, fertilisers, ceramics), however, gas remains an essential input factor that cannot be easily replaced or reduced. Faced with gas shortages and high energy prices, they have little choice but reduce output or relocate production outside Europe – a scenario that has proved particularly troubling for politicians in Germany, Europe's export-oriented manufacturing powerhouse [17, 18].

In sum, Europe's drive for energy independence from Russia has proved costly but has advanced more quickly than originally anticipated. One year after the invasion of Ukraine, oil and coal imports from Russia are down to nearly zero, while the flow of Russian gas through the pipelines network has been substantially cut. European leaders were able to overcome institutional inertia and regulatory hurdles to build new LNG terminals, sanction Russian energy exports and aggressively bid for alternative energy sources in world markets. As a consequence, Moscow has already lost much of its stranglehold over Europe's energy network and is now suffering from a ballooning fiscal deficit. Its military spending has shot up, while export losses and sanctions are beginning to bite. Concerns remain, however, about a renewed energy crisis in the winter season of 2023–24, particularly as China's economic growth and energy demand is expected to pick up again. For this reason, Fatih Birol, the head of the International Energy

² For an overview of different economic modelling results, see McWilliams [6, p.1–2].

Agency (IEA), cautioned in February 2023 that “it would be too strong to say that Europe has won the energy battle already” [19]. Europe’s struggle for energy security and independence, just like the war in Ukraine, is unlikely to end anytime soon.

WHAT HAPPENED TO EUROPE’S CLIMATE AMBITION?

How did the push for energy independence affect Europe’s long-term climate strategy? In the first few months after the invasion, when European governments scrambled to secure alternative fossil fuel supplies, experts predicted a major setback for the EU’s net zero strategy. The reopening or extension of coal-fired power plants and the building of new infrastructure for LNG imports seemed to suggest that, far from accelerating the shift away from fossil fuels, Europe was willing to delay the net zero transition in a bid to wean itself off Russian energy. Few commentators doubted the urgent need to gain strategic autonomy vis-à-vis Moscow. However, as GHG emissions began to rise again in the first half of 2022, reversing a decade-long decarbonisation trend in Europe, questions surfaced about whether Europe’s climate leadership was under threat from the renewed focus on energy security [20, 21]. One commentator went as far as stating that “geopolitical confrontations and the foreign policy agenda seem to have gained the upper hand, and EU energy policy is now being adjusted to the necessities of realpolitik” [22].

One year after the invasion, such climate policy pessimism seems increasingly misplaced. A temporary increase in coal usage initially drove up emission levels, but the combination of a warm winter, effective demand management and energy savings in industry led to an overall decline of Europe’s emissions. According to IEA estimates, the continent’s energy-related emissions fell by 2.5 percent in 2022, with sharply reduced natural gas emissions counteracting increases in emissions from the burning of coal and oil [23].

More importantly, the Ukraine war did not reduce Europe’s determination to push ahead with its net zero climate strategy. Far from it, Russia’s military aggression seemed to have galvanised European policy-makers to accelerate the decarbonisation drive. In March 2022, the European Commission declared unequivocally that “[f]ollowing the invasion of Ukraine, the case for a rapid clean energy transition has never been stronger and clearer” [24]. With its 2050 net zero commitment and interim target of a 55 percent reduction of emissions by 2030, the EU had already staked out a claim for being a “climate great power” with a desire to advance the international climate agenda [25]. Europe’s immediate energy response to the Ukraine war therefore posed a threat to this international leadership position, but more recent actions have reduced such concerns. Indeed, by the end of 2022, the EU was able to agree a package of measures to accelerate investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency. It also enacted overdue reforms to the EU emissions trading system, which helped drive up carbon prices in Europe [15].

There are good reasons to conclude that the search for energy independence from Russia has not derailed the EU’s net zero transition. Despite the decision to reactivate coal power plants, Europe did not entrench a “return to coal” as originally feared. In fact, much of the extra coal capacity that EU countries created in 2022 remained unused. Coal-fired power generation started to fall again by the end of the year and is expected to continue to decline in future years. By contrast, investment in renewable energy has continued apace. By the end of 2022, wind and solar installations produced a record 22 percent of electricity in the EU, ahead of gas (20 percent) and coal (16 percent) [26]. If there is a trade-off between energy independence and climate policy in Europe, it exists only in the short run. In the long run, only a determined switch away from coal, oil and gas can serve both strategic objectives.

Unfortunately, the war’s wider climate policy repercussions in international society have not been as benign. For one, Russia’s attack on Ukraine has absorbed a lot of political attention in capitals around the world that would be better spent on advancing international climate cooperation. Moreover, amidst the energy crisis that has afflicted the global economy, many governments rolled out support programmes for households and industry that often ended up boosting high carbon energy sources. By the end of 2022, global subsidies for fossil fuels shot up to a record \$1 trillion [27]. Several major GHG emitters in the Global South also snapped up cheap energy exports from Russia that Western customers had rejected. If this global demand shift continues, it is bound to lock in high-carbon energy production in key emerging economies, such as India and China, which would have an adverse impact on global emissions trends.

As for Russia, its military aggression and the impact of Western sanctions have, if anything, made the country ever more reliant on future fossil fuel revenues and increased its hostility to the net zero transition. Moscow continues to engage in the international climate negotiations but increasingly acts as a recalcitrant player. At the COP27 conference in Egypt and in other forums, for example, Russia firmly opposed any agreement aimed at reducing fossil fuel use or at increasing renewable energy [28].

International climate cooperation has thus suffered several setbacks due to the war in Ukraine, although high energy prices have reinforced the importance of accelerating the green energy revolution. So far, international support for the Paris Agreement has held up, and the international climate regime is flexible enough to withstand temporary crises. The more difficult question is whether the main climate great powers can transcend at least some of their fundamental differences and carve out a niche for continued multilateral cooperation on the climate threat.³

CONCLUSIONS

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 exposed Europe's strategic miscalculation in having allowed itself to become dependent on Russian energy supplies. Faced with the horrors of the most devastating war on European soil since World War II, the EU decided to cut the links that had tied its economy to Russia's fossil fuel wealth. Within a matter of a few months, Europe stopped all Russian coal imports. A year after the start of the invasion, it also imposed a comprehensive embargo on seaborne oil exports from Russia. Replacing gas imports from Russia proved more difficult, but a combination of reduced gas consumption and alternative LNG supplies have allowed Europe to dramatically cut its dependence on Russian natural gas flows.

The dramatic U-turn in Europe's energy strategy following Putin's war of aggression has proved costly and disruptive to Europe's economy, fuelling inflation and bringing economic growth to a halt. However, against expectations, the continent managed to prevent an energy crunch in the winter of 2022–23. Russia may have been able to weaponise its role as Europe's single largest fossil fuel supplier, but in doing so it lost its energy stranglehold on Europe. The energy decoupling that started in 2022 is likely to mark the biggest turnaround in Europe's relationship with Russia since the end of the Cold War.

Initially, Europe's measures to cut energy ties with Russia drove up the continent's GHG emissions. Coal use shot up and new fossil fuel supply agreements were struck. At least in the short run, Europe's push for energy independence and security threatened to undermine its climate strategy and reputation as a global climate leader. Yet, in the long run, energy security and climate policy have proved to be mutually supportive. The Ukraine war has galvanised European leaders to reaffirm their commitment to the net zero goal and accelerate their decarbonisation efforts. Driving down reliance on fossil fuels should thus be seen as the single most important tool of Europe's energy security strategy.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

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³ On the role of great power cooperation in tackling climate change, see Barry Buzan and Robert Falkner [29].

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