



On the way towards the Energy Union: Position of Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia towards external energy security integration



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ABSTRACT

External energy security has gained importance within the EU due to the current Russian-Ukrainian natural gas dispute, but also because of mid- and long-term issues connected to the availability of energy supply in Europe. The Energy Union proposal is supposed to increase the coherence of the EU in external energy, thus contributing to the energy security of the Community. However, various member states have already expressed different (not always positive) views, concerning this project. In order to shed light on the further development of the Energy Union, the present paper – based on 52 semi-structured interviews – examines members states' support for and opposition to the further deepening of integration in external energy security. By analysing Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, this paper argues that member states' preferences depend at least partly on the decision-makers' perceptions of their state's ability to cope with three energy security challenges (external, internal and business). States whose decision-makers believe that their countries are able to successfully cope with these challenges are more likely to oppose further integration in energy security area, while member states whose decision-makers view these tasks as challenging are more likely to support the transfer of competences to the EU.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an increased interest in external energy security (EES) within the European Union (EU) caused by the ongoing dispute between Ukraine (UA) and the Russian Federation (RF) concerning natural gas. In 2014, the current President of the European Council Donald Tusk proposed an initiative aimed at (among other issues) strengthening EES of EU member states (MS). The resulting Energy Union (EnU) proposal was officially introduced by the European Commission (EC) on 25 February 2015 [1] and supported by the heads of MS at the European Council meeting on 19 March 2015 [2]. The significance of the EnU project was underlined by the EC's Vice-President of the EC Maroš Šefčovič, who called it the “most ambitious energy project since the coal and

steel community” [3].

This proposal also reflects EU's complicated position when it comes to energy in general [4] and EES in particular [5]. Due to decreasing domestic production (Fig. 3), the EU relies to a significant degree on Russian gas to cover its consumption (Figs. 1 and 2).¹ Moreover, the slow development of internal infrastructure and non-Russian diversification projects² shows a very limited ability to replace existing supply routes. On top of that, in July 2015, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev announced that the RF was planning to stop using the Brotherhood pipeline for gas exports to Europe after

² Nabucco can no longer be considered a viable project and the competitiveness of its alternative (TANAP and TAP pipelines) is currently threatened by the Turkish Stream, which is supposed to replace the South Stream. TANAP (going through Turkish territory) in connection with TAP (Greece-Italy) is supposed to supply the EU with 'non-Russian' gas from Azerbaijan, thus increasing energy security of the community and decreasing its dependence on Russian supplies. However, the Turkish Stream presents a direct competition for this project since, unlike South Stream (which was supposed to go from Bulgaria to Austria), it is supposed to go through Turkish territory and terminate at the Turkish-Greek border. Although EU member states have expanded their import capacity of liquefied natural gas (LNG), its utilisation rates are very low (about 25%), and a large part of it “is not well connected to a broader market” [7].

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¹ In 2015, the RF supplied 129.3 billion cubic metres (bcm) of natural gas to the EU [90]. Given the fast depletion of the MS's modest domestic reserves [96] and the questionable development of Norwegian supplies [97], it is expected that in spite of the slow growth in demand until 2030 [97], the Union “will continue to depend on Russian pipeline gas imports” [98: 8]. Furthermore, in 2013 gas imports from the RF increased by 19.5% compared to 2012, while imports from Norway declined by 4.6%, and those from North Africa by 20% [99].

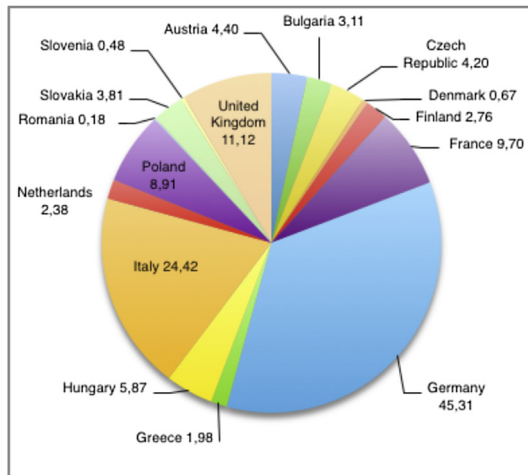


Fig. 1. Gas deliveries to the EU by Gazprom (in bcm, 2015). Source: [90].

the current contract terminates at the very beginning of 2020 [6]. Therefore, “the disruption of Russian natural gas exports to Europe may [still] have severe consequences” [7], even though the EU’s security of supply improved since the 2009 gas crisis [8].

Such concerns bring questions about EES to the EU table. However, the success of the propositions introduced by the EnU with the aim of increasing EES is influenced by MS’ “divergent views” on this issue [9: 265]. The aim of this paper is to analyse the different positions of some MS towards the deepening of integration in EES area. The research question asks when MS support and when they oppose steps leading to increased cooperation in EES area at the EU level. The paper analyses three MS: Austria (AT), the Czech Republic (CZ) and Slovakia (SK) (see Section 3.3 for case selection). The centrality of the MS for further development of EES is given by the fact that EES is not harmonized at the EU level – the Lisbon Treaty implicitly stipulates that MS keep their competences in this area [10]. The “lack of coherence among the member states” on external energy integration [11: 787] was further demonstrated by their mixed reactions to the EnU proposal [2]. However, the proposal itself is only the first step, a blueprint for further integration in energy area, as future developments of the policy (including EES) will depend on the willingness of the MS to adopt further acts envisioned by the proposal in its ‘action points’ [1].

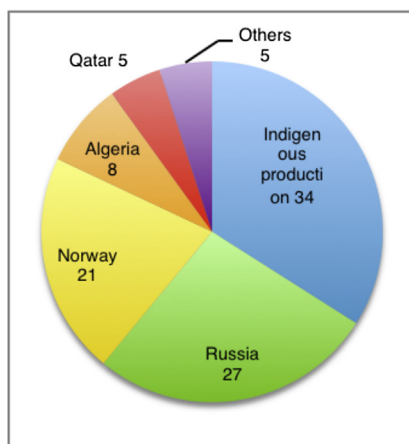


Fig. 2. EU natural gas supply by source country (in %, 2013). Source: [91].

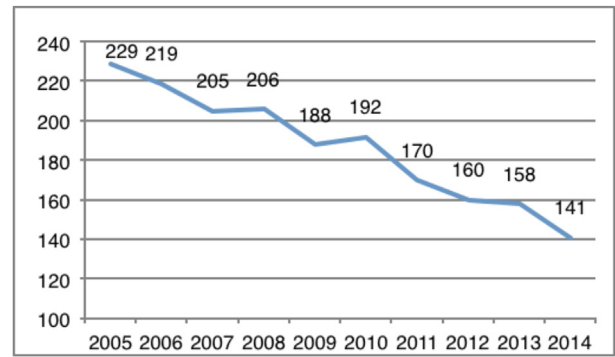


Fig. 3. Domestic production in the EU (in bcm). Source: [92].

This paper argues that the position of the MS at least partly depends on the decision-makers’ perception about their states’ abilities to cope with EES. In order to conceptualize this ability the paper introduces a synthetic model combining three energy challenges (external, internal and business). The model reflects the complexity of EES and goes beyond one-dimensional approaches of previous studies which focus on a particular level or actor. For example, analyses of the EC’s efforts in EES argue that the institution has become a powerful player in the area [12], even more powerful than the MS originally intended [13]. A study focusing on the internal energy market and the role of small and medium MS of the EU (SMMS) concludes that the liberalisation process is advancing correctly; however, the gas market completion still presents the main challenge [14]. An analysis of Poland’s efforts to uphold its external energy preferences at the EU level shows that it succeeded only when it comes to energy solidarity [15], that, paradoxically, seems to serve more as a cover for individual rather than collective efforts to improve energy security [16]. This paper claims that such individual dimensions of EES are mutually interwoven and all of them contribute to our understanding of MS’ preferences in EES area.

The present paper aims to make a contribution in two areas. First, it wants to contribute to the existing scholarship on energy integration within the EU that has, besides the already mentioned topics, also dealt with a number of other issues. For example, it has been argued that EC pursues a liberal energy agenda in spite of the fact that the world is becoming more and more mercantilist (i.e. ‘realist’) [17]. The EU’s focus on ‘soft power’ (especially regulation) does not have to inevitably put the community into a disadvantageous position, as such an approach supports the EU’s position as an international energy actor [18]. Moreover, existing research on energy pointed out the perceived vulnerability of the 2004 and 2007 EU entrants [19] or provided a general overview of the EU’s energy policy situation [20].

The second aim of this paper is to contribute to the nascent discussion on EU energy policy issues within *Energy*. Previously published papers within the journal have analysed a wide range of policy-related issues. For example, Carvalho summarized the main issues and implications of the European Strategy for Energy and Climate Change [21], deLlano-Paz and his colleagues the newest EC’s proposal in the area of energy policy – the Energy Union [22]. Moreover, individual MS’ energy policies and their policy implications have been scrutinized. Different energy development scenarios in connection to energy security have been analysed in the case of Croatia [23]. The development of the German *Energiewende* and its influence on energy strategies within the EU has also been examined [24]. Besides, a comparative study of MS’s ability to find a

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