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Research Article

REPowerEU As a Crisis Response: Immediate Diversification and Green Transition

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Abstract

The EU has been facing an energy crisis on behalf of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. To substitute Russian fossil fuels, the EU has built its response on the European Green Deal (EGD), the REPowerEU plan. The plan has three main pillars: diversification of energy supplies, green energy investments, and promoting energy saving. The article focuses on the performance of the REPowerEU Plan by analyzing it both internally and externally. The article provides a background for how the REPowerEU Plan is built upon the EGD by examining the links between these two strategies. Then, the article focuses on these three pillars. First, the article provides an insight into the diversification policy by referencing LNG and pipeline agreements and critical raw material agreements for renewables. Second, the article provides an overview of the EU's green energy investments since the initiation of the REPowerEU Plan. Third, energy saving is analyzed through the internal practices of the EU. The article emphasizes that the REPowerEU plan entails a combination of short-term and long-term measures in the energy crisis response. Though the plan has contributed to the EGD's overarching goals in a broader context, its primary focus seems to secure the EU's energy demand. In this sense, the article draws a conclusion that underlines the imbalance between the green transition and the immediate needs.

Keywords: REPowerEU, European Green Deal, Energy Geopolitics, The EU Climate Policy

JEL Classification: F5, Q01, N44, N74

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Bir Kriz Yanıtı Olarak REPowerEU: Acil Çeşitlendirme ve Yeşil Geçiş

Öz

AB, Rusya'nın Şubat 2022'de Ukrayna'yı işgal etmesi nedeniyle bir enerji kriziyle karşı karşıya kalmıştır. AB, Rusya'nın fosil yakutlarını ikame etmek için politik yanıtını REPowerEU Planı'nı oluşturarak Avrupa Yeşil Mutabakatı (AYM) üzerine kurmuştur. Planın üç ana ayağı bulunmaktadır; enerji arzının çeşitlendirilmesi, yeşil enerji yatırımları ve enerji tasarrufunun teşvik edilmesi. Makale, REPowerEU Planı'nın hem dahili hem de harici olarak analiz ederek, planın performansına odaklanmaktadır. Makale, bu iki strateji arasındaki bağlantıları inceleyerek REPowerEU Planı'nın AYM üzerine nasıl inşa edildiğine dair bir arka plan sunmaktadır. Daha sonra makale planın üç ana sütuna odaklanmaktadır. İlk olarak, LNG ve boru hattı anlaşmalarına ve yenilenebilir enerji kaynaklarına yönelik kritik hammadde anlaşmalarına atıfta bulunarak çeşitlendirme politikasına dair bir perspektif sağlanmaktadır. İkinci olarak makale, REPowerEU Planı'nın başlatılmasından bu yana AB'nin yeşil enerji yatırımlarına genel bir bakış sunmaktadır. Son olarak, enerji tasarrufu AB'nin iç pratikleri üzerinden analiz edilmektedir. Makale, Planı'nın enerji krizine müdahalede kısa vadeli ve uzun vadeli önlemlerin bir kombinasyonunu içerdiğini vurgulamaktadır. Plan, AYM'nin kapsayıcı hedeflerine daha geniş bir bağlamda katkıda bulursa da öncelikli odak noktasının AB'nin enerji talebini güvence altına almak olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Bu anlamda makale, yeşil geçiş ile acil ihtiyaçlar arasında bir dengesizlik bulunduğu sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: REPowerEU, Avrupa Yeşil Mutabakatı, Enerji Jeopolitiği, AB İklim Politikası

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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long been an active in environmental and climate change policy. Historically, the EU's involvement in environmental policy dates back to the 1972 Stockholm Conference, which caused the development of the EU's own Environmental Action Programmes (EAPs) through the years (Gravey et al., 2022). There have been seven successive EAPs that the EU has initiated over the years (Selin & VanDeveer, 2015), and the current 8th EAP has built upon the EGD and entered into force in 2022 (European Commission, 2022). Besides the EAPs, the EU has made consecutive changes and amendments in the EU Treaties in order to provide legal competency for environmental action, and climate change policies later on (Jordan et al., 2021). In time, with the increasing impact of scientific research and global public response, climate change has become a global issue in world politics. The EU has extended its environmental policy in a way that comprises climate change, in particular regarding the urgency of climate change issues. Since the initiation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in the 1992 Rio Conference, the EU has initiated ambitious policies, strategies, and norms and is often called as an exemplary climate leader through the years (Dupont et al., 2023). Initial policy of greenhouse gases (GHG) reductions under the UNFCCC, and later the Kyoto Protocol, has extended an overarching target-setting and policy-making comprising a number of different sectors. In addition, the EU's environment and climate change policy has become compatible with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its predecessors. Thus, environment and climate change have become serious political concerns of the EU, both domestically and externally. With the election of the Von der Leyen Commission in 2019, this political tendency has become a top policy priority. President Von der Leyen declared her agenda that the EGD is the top priority, with the ultimate goal of becoming the first climate-neutral continent by 2050 (Von der Leyen, 2019). In parallel to that, the EGD declared on 11 December 2019 with a European Commission (EC) Communication that outlines the EU's new growth strategy under four main goals towards at least 55% GHG emissions reduction by 2030 and becoming climate-neutral by 2050, compared to the 1990 GHG emissions levels (European Commission, 2019). These main pillars of the EGD are reaching net-zero GHG emissions gradually (1), decoupling the EU's economy from resource use (2), leaving no one behind through a

just transition (3), and leading global green transition via setting credible examples for others (4) (European Commission 2019). In other words, the EGD has environmental, economic, social and external dimensions. In this aspect, it could be argued that the EGD is compatible with the EU's environmental policy dynamics, which are Europeanization, internationalization, and policy integration (Gravey et al., 2022) and the UN SDGs (European Commission, 2019). The EGD has brought a large variety of cross-sectoral policies and legislative measures that aim to make the EGD targets legally binding. The most prominent example of this approach is the Fit for 55 Package proposal. Through this extensive package, the EC has proposed various cross-sectoral measures and a European Climate Law, which originally had a target of 50% (increased to 55% by the EC later on) GG emission reductions by 2030 and achieving climate neutrality by 2050 (European Commission, 2020). In addition, the EGD has its own financing mechanisms to make the strategy financially sustainable and feasible. The cross-sectoral policies, on the other hand, are extensive and diverse, from trade, industry, agriculture, biodiversity, chemicals, transport, urban mobility, circular economy, just transition, and social inclusion (European Commission, 2019). The EU mobilized its budget to meet these targets and initiated new finance mechanisms such as the Just Transition Mechanism and Fund (European Commission, 2019). Under this intensity of policies and strategies, green energy transformation is considered one of the pivotal policy options, according to the EC. In the original EGD Communication, the EC emphasized the central role of clean and affordable energy supply with the notion of "smart integration" and combined this integration with a broader energy security perspective (European Commission, 2019). In addition, the EC underlined energy efficiency, particularly for industrial energy use and buildings (European Commission, 2019). However, the original EGD Communication does not include any measures or mention of energy saving. Yet, it must be noted that this approach is mainly derived from the EGD's main characteristic of making economic growth greener and sustainable rather than employing a degrowth perspective through emission reduction policies. On behalf of this brief introduction, it might be argued that the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is a turning point and a challenge for the survival and resilience of the whole EGD strategy. Russia has long been the EU's top energy provider, which caused an EU dependency on Russian fossil fuel supplies (European Council, 2023). The EU has explicitly opposed the Russian invasion and developed an active political stance with Ukraine since February 2022. This political opposition and explicit support to Ukraine inevitably caused an immediate reaction of disruption of the Russian fossil fuels supplies. Though the EU, via the EGD, has a strategy to reduce fossil fuels dependency gradually, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has made this phase-out a top priority and urgent. Hence, the EU immediately initiated the REPowerEU Plan in May 2022, which is built upon the EU's new growth strategy, the European Green Deal, to provide a response to this emerging energy crisis (European Commission, 2022a). The next section provides a qualitative analysis of the REPowerEU Plan and discussions in the existing literature by identifying its three main dimensions in detail. It also draws a perspective on the crisis response and green transition in a broader context.

2. The REPowerEU Plan

As mentioned earlier, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has affected the EU's green transition plans severely, mainly due to the EU's dependency on the Russian fossil fuels of gas, oil, and coal. According to the EC, this dependency equals 57-60% of the EU's total energy consumption between 2017-2022 (European Commission, 2022b). In more detail, before 2022, the EU was 45% in the gas sector, 40% in crude oil, and 27% in hard coal, dependent on Russia on an annual basis (European Commission, 2022b). The interruption in energy supplies from Russia has forced the EU to develop an urgent phase-out from Russian supplies against the emerging energy crisis. Accordingly, the EU initiated the REPowerEU Plan to diversify energy sources with the motto of "affordable, secure, and sustainable energy for Europe" in March 2022 (European Commission, 2022c). The final version of the REPowerEU Plan was published in May 2022, in which energy

saving was mentioned for the first time as a dimension of the strategy (European Commission, 2022a). According to the final version of the REPowerEU Plan, there are three main dimensions: diversification of energy supplies, improvement of green energy investments, and empowering EU citizens for energy saving (European Commission, 2022a). Besides, with the REPowerEU, the EU aimed to stabilize and provide various financial supports for energy prices, improve energy storage for the 2022-2023 winter season, and promote smart investments through National and European-level Energy Plans (European Commission, 2022a). These measures are estimated to be approximately €210 billion by 2027 under the EU's Recover and Resilience Facility (RRF) (Karda, 2023). To provide a more comprehensive outlook, the three dimensions of the REPowerEU Plan are discussed in detail in the following sub-sections.

2.1. Diversification of Energy Supplies

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the EU aims to end Russian dependency on fossil fuels and the overarching goal of phase-out from fossil fuels. In the REPowerEU context, diversification refers to varying the type and sources of energy import. Namely, the EU has aimed to import Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), biomethane, and renewable hydrogen from countries such as Qatar, the US, Egypt, Israel, UAE, Namibia, and Kazakhstan (Kardas, 2023). With this strategy, the EU aimed to keep its industry functioning and meet other sectoral energy demands, such as transportation and household energy. Also, the EU has formed an EU Energy Platform to coordinate collective gas, LNG, and hydrogen purchases for its member states through international outreach (European Commission, 2022d). In accordance with this approach, more than 130 energy agreements have been concluded at both the bilateral and the EU levels, including LNG, hydrogen, and natural gas other than Russian sources, since January 2022 (Dennison et al., 2023). Moreover, the EU aimed to provide nuclear fuel from non-Russian sources for the Member States are Bulgaria, Czechia, Finland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland, where such atomic power plants are used for either power generation or scientific research (European Commission, 2022a). Besides these measures, domestic natural gas production, where possible, has been promoted in the Plan's diversification section. (European Commission, 2022a). As a result of this diversification strategy, the EU claims that there is a reduction from 41% to 9% in Russian pipeline gas imports within the total EU imports between August 2021 and August 2022 (European Commission, 2022e). On the other hand, although it is not directly an energy source, critical raw materials (CRMs) are key in the green energy transition, in particular their use in renewable energy infrastructure and energy production processes. It means that there is a dependency on CRMs, and this dependency is perceived as a subject matter of the EU's diversification strategy. In this context, the EU has intended to conclude CRM agreements with foreign partners to secure its supply. For example, in June 2023, the EU initiated a strategic partnership with Brazil, including the CRM supplies as a part of a broader green transition and trade framework (European Commission, 2023). Therefore, it might be argued that energy diversification in terms of source and energy type is also a geopolitical security concern that involves various forms of negotiation, alliance-forming, and the ability to sustain partnerships abroad for the EU. Yet, this dimension of the REPowerEU is the short-term response to the energy crisis, as well as energy saving. In this context, the following section provides an insight into a more sustainable and long-term response, the green energy transformation of the EU.

2.2. Green Energy Investments

The second dimension, scaling up green energy investments, is the central and sustainable strategy toward the ultimate fossil fuels phase-out goal of the REPowerEU Plan. It is obvious that to execute such a transition, there has to be a viable, affordable, and sustainable alternative. In this context, the REPowerEU employs boosting renewables (including solar photovoltaics, wind energy, and heat pumps), promoting hydrogen imports and domestic production, and increasing sustainable biomethane production and use across the EU (European Commission, 2022a). In more detail, the

EU aims to increase its capacity to 1236 GW in renewables by 2030, 10 million tonnes of domestic production and 10 million tonnes of imports in hydrogen by 2030, and improve its production to 35 billion cubic meters (bcm) in biomethane by 2030 (European Commission, 2022a). Besides, via the plan, the EU aimed to improve electrification in the transport sector through legislative initiatives for zero-emission vehicles, promoting alternative fuels, and greening freight transport (European Commission, 2022a). As mentioned earlier in this paper, the leading energy consumer sectors of the EU are industry, households, and transport. While transport covers a large amount of energy consumption, fossil fuels in particular, it requires a complex, well-designed, all-encompassing transition. On the other hand, such an energy transition requires a prioritized investment strategy. The REPowerEU Plan titles this as a “smart investment” that entails €210 billion by 2027, as mentioned earlier. This estimated investment is composed of €113 billion for renewables, €56 billion for energy efficiency and heat pumps, €41 billion for phase-out in industry, €37 billion to increase biomethane production, €29 billion in the power grids to increase electricity use, €10 billion in LNG and pipeline gas imports, and €1.5-2 billion for oil supply security (European Commission, 2022f). Unlike diversification, “smart” investment has more long- and, at least, medium-term characteristics. Moreover, to sustain such a strategy, there has to be any external energy supply or CRM import shortages, future budget cuts, and shifts in the political will. Saving time and money for the necessary transition brings the discussion to one of the controversial aspects of the REPowerEU Plan, promoting energy saving, which is discussed in the next section.

2.3. Energy Saving

When the EGD Communication was released on 11 December 2019, one of the main goals was to reach climate neutrality gradually without causing economic damage to EU citizens. In other words, the EGD claimed that it is not a degrowth strategy. When the EGD is examined, it is seen that the strategy provides various well-designed responses for possible economic and social impacts. Yet, the energy crisis has also tested the EGD’s sustainable growth approach. As mentioned in this article, energy saving has become a third dimension of the REPowerEU in its final version. Similar to diversification, energy saving is a short-term response. It is also called as “the quickest and cheapest way” to address the energy crisis (European Commission, 2022a). Similar to the whole plan, an urgent and long-term distinction is made for energy saving. In the short run, the EU aimed to reduce energy use by affecting consumer behaviors while employing energy efficiency measures in the long run (European Commission, 2022a). In energy saving, the EU, in cooperation with the International Energy Agency (IEA), has advocated a bunch of individual measures called “Playing My Part” as follows: turning down heating and using less air air-conditioning, adjusting boiler settings, working from home, reducing speed on highways, leaving individual cars at home on Sundays in large cities, walking or using bike for short journeys rather than driving car, using public transport, using train instead of plane (International Energy Agency, 2022). In energy efficiency, the EU pledged to increase its energy efficiency target to 13%, as declared in the Energy Efficiency Directive (European Commission, 2022a). On the other hand, the sustainability of energy saving policy is quite doubtful, depending on the possibility of a rise in public concerns and the diminishing willingness of EU citizens to save as time passes. Also, promoting energy saving could bring adverse effects on the economy, such as job losses and degrowth, which are also aimed to be prevented by the EGD strategy. A backlash in energy saving approach might be expected in time, which depends on the improvement of energy efficiency and the success of the fossil fuels phase-out.

3. Conclusion

The article has examined the three dimensions of the REPowerEU Plan by identifying to what extent they are politically, economically, and environmentally sustainable. At that point, it will be more plausible to perceive the REPowerEU as a transitional strategy towards not only green transition but also a broader geopolitical shift. As Siddi and Prandin (2023) underline, the EU’s recent energy crisis

response was a geopolitical turn, which signifies developing narrower strategic partnerships with “like-minded” states rather than forming multilateral coalitions for collective action and prioritizing the EU’s energy security. Besides, this shift is also visible in the official documents of the EU regarding the REPowerEU to the extent that around 40% percent coverage of security issues, whereas green transition covers around 27% (Wendler, 2023). In other words, climate action has become a component of the EU’s geopolitical autonomy, as Wendler (2023) underlines. The EU’s approach to diversification and securing supplies may even affect the existing power structures of the EU's foreign partners, such as in North Africa and the Middle Eastern countries (Engström, 2023). Yet, it must be noted that, unlike the 2009 and 2014 energy crises, the EU provided a response that encompasses climate objectives hand in hand with energy security (Giuli & Oberthür, 2023). While climate was being securitized, the evolving energy crisis also has a potential for carbon lock-in derived from high energy prices and relatively slow progress in green energy infrastructure (Homeyer et al., 2022). Such a lock-in may delay the transition and force the EU to continue energy and CRM imports from foreign partners (Siddi & Prandin, 2023). It is evident that as long as the Russia-Ukraine war continues, the EU may not be likely to shift its political stance against Russia. This means that the phase-out of fossil fuels, both from Russian sources and the whole, is the only viable policy option for the EU. The EU has already developed its climate framework through the EGD and made it a legally binding policy for the Union. Also, the REPowerEU provided cohesion in funding green transition and improved the fiscal capacity of the EU in the crisis response (Fama, 2023). In that sense, the EU is expected to sustain and fortify its green transition. Still, the Plan has limitations regarding short-term versus long-term dichotomy among its targets towards the fossil fuels phase-out. First, as emphasized throughout this article, diversification and energy saving are short-term policy instruments, and their political, economic, and social sustainability seem unlikely; in particular, upcoming elections are taken into consideration. As this article outlines, these two measures are employed to address the immediate needs of the EU. Second, improving and promoting green energy investments becomes the only long-term policy option, which is also coherent with the broader EU climate framework. On the other hand, it might be argued that the three dimensions of the REPowerEU are complementary and also contribute to the resilience of the EGD against the energy crisis from their own perspectives. Also, the REPowerEU signifies the flexibility and adaptability of the EGD, particularly the ability to shift policy priorities in response to geopolitical challenges.

CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

This study was entirely conducted by Anıl Ömer Taydaş.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

There is no financial conflict of interest with any institution, organization or person and there is no conflict of interest among the authors

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