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A different logic of polity building? The Russian invasion of Ukraine and EU citizens' demand for social security

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ABSTRACT




The present study considers whether the Russian invasion of Ukraine constitutes an opportunity for EU policy centralisation and polity-building in non-military domains, according to a social security logic. It argues that the war and growing concerns about energy security and prices have presented EU policymakers with a transboundary policy puzzle on how to ensure autonomy in energy supply, fight climate change and protect household disposable income. Then, it examines public preferences on energy and social policy options, evaluating whether the war contributed to increasing demand for supra-national capacity building and investigating the priorities (and divides) across and within EU countries in these policy areas. The findings show that social security concerns related to the war in Ukraine have been translated into greater support for policy centralisation, but they have not helped to overcome divides over conflicting policy goals, leaving policymakers with some difficult decisions.

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KEYWORDS Energy security; Ecological sustainability; Polity-building; Social Security; European Union

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised serious concerns amongst EU citizens not only regarding their personal safety but also on their prosperity and social safety. The present study investigates mechanisms beyond the 'bellicist security logic' (Kelemen and McNamara, 2022; see also Truchlewski *et al.*, 2023 and Wang and Moise, 2023) that may have contributed to growing public demands for EU policy centralisation and polity-building.

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Recent studies have indeed suggested that polity building may emerge from citizens' demands to the EU to provide solutions to transborder collective action problems (Freudlesperger and Schimmelfenning, 2022) and, in particular, from concerns for social security (Ferrera, Kriesi and Schelkle, 2023; see also Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2022). The underlying assumption is that modern polities are 'geared towards protecting citizens' ontological security from other threats such as social dislocation, economic hardship, and environmental degradation' (Freudlesperger and Schimmelfenning, 2022, 1874).

Against this backdrop, the present study examines citizens' demands for the EU to protect them against emerging social risks – interpreted herein in a broad sense and including those relating to climate change – according to a 'social security logic' and their consequences for EU polity formation. First, it argues that the Russian invasion of Ukraine initiated a transboundary crisis (Boin *et al.* 2014) that might be described as an energy security, ecological sustainability, and equity trilemma. Secondly, it shows that the war has generated strong demands for EU protection in the face of threats to prosperity and ecological and social security. Thirdly, it suggests that such demands may conflict with each other, and it stresses the related challenges in designing a policy package able to reconcile them. This is relevant because public opinion may constrain government policy at the EU level, especially during polarising times (Hagemann *et al.*, 2017; Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Indeed, in the aftermath of the polycrisis of the last few decades, Europeans have become divided not only along the integration-demarcation divide but also on the specific type of integration (Gerhards *et al.*, 2019). To understand present and future EU politics, it is essential that attitudes towards EU energy and social policy are explored, especially given the current high saliency of these issues.

The study is organised as follows. First, it outlines the features of the transboundary crisis generated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and presents several hypotheses. Secondly, it introduces a survey that was conducted in the framework of the SOLID project. Thirdly, it shows the results of our analysis of public preferences for energy and social policy options. The last section discusses the implications of the findings.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and public demand for energy security, ecological sustainability, and social security

The war in Ukraine, the ensuing economic sanctions against Russia, and rising energy prices have fuelled a transboundary crisis in the EU, i.e., a crisis extending beyond established territorial, functional, and cultural boundaries and threatening the capacity of political systems to provide public goods (Boin *et al.*, 2014; Freudlesperger and Schimmelfenning, 2022). The multi-dimensional policy puzzle faced by EU policymakers has three principal components (Kuzemko *et al.*, 2022).

Firstly, many countries' energy systems depended heavily on fossil fuel imports from Russia,¹ making them vulnerable to retaliation. Moreover, since revenue from said imports constituted the largest source of income for Russia (and hence an enabler of its military), dependency on them began to be viewed as a problem in its own right. Just a few weeks after the invasion, the European Commission (EC) introduced the REPowerEU plan to end all Russian energy imports before 2030 (European Commission, 2022).

Secondly, the EU's transition away from dependence on Russian energy presented policymakers with a dilemma; should they fast-forward the clean transition or postpone the 'climate turn' in supranational energy policy (Dupont *et al.*, 2020; von Homeyer *et al.*, 2021)? Indeed, soon after the invasion, some suggested that a turn to clean and renewable sources would not reduce energy prices quickly enough, and several member states – including Austria, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, and the Czech Republic – extended the lives of their coal-fired power plants, while others started to revert to less sustainable energy infrastructures. In short, political support for the transition to clean energy sources was immediately questioned, both at national and supranational levels.

Thirdly, the price of fossil fuels rose dramatically after the onset of the war, so inflation which was already 5 per cent at the end of 2021 (the highest level since the creation of the common currency) rose still further.² The subsequent reduction in purchasing power has led to the impoverishment of large segments of the European population while rising energy costs have compelled many companies to limit production and lay off workers. Cash transfers and subsidies may mitigate these events, but they would require increased spending on social protection systems which, however, if left at the national level, may result in suboptimal choices given the limited fiscal space available in certain member states.

This is, in brief, the energy security, environmental sustainability, and equity trilemma (Fu *et al.*, 2021; Kuzemko *et al.*, 2022; Mandelli *et al.*, 2021). While others have investigated whether the war activated an external security logic of polity formation (Genschel, 2022; Truchlewski *et al.*, 2023; Wang & Moise, 2023), we argue this situation may trigger a social security one, as EU citizens may increasingly support EU policy centralization to guarantee their prosperity and social safety. Enabling authoritative decision-making on a transnational scale, the EU maintains a potential functional advantage in responding to such a crisis (Boin *et al.* 2014). Remarkably, before the war, the EC seemed already aware that these pressing challenges were inter-related, and it elaborated strategies linking (and possibly creating synergies between) energy, climate, and social objectives (Kyriazi and Mirò, 2022; Mandelli *et al.*, 2021). Over the past few decades, ambitious policies to mitigate the consequences of climate change have taken pride of place on the EU

agenda (Dupont *et al.*, 2020; von Homeyer *et al.*, 2021). The process culminated in December 2019 when every Member State bar Poland endorsed the European Green Deal (EGD), a comprehensive package designed to achieve a 55 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030 and full climate neutrality by 2050 (von Homeyer *et al.*, 2021). In July 2021 the EC proposed new targets for the share of renewable energy in total energy consumption (20 per cent by 2020 and 32 per cent by 2030) and for energy efficiency improvements (20 per cent for 2020 and 32.5 per cent for 2030).

Through the creation of the Just Transition Fund (JTF), the EGD also aims to alleviate some of the negative social externalities of the green transition (Kyriazi and Mirò, 2022). This is because the EU is aware that the transition to a greener economy will produce new winners and losers (Mandelli *et al.*, 2021), as the distributional characteristics of climate change and green policies are very likely to affect vulnerable social groups the most (Gaikwad *et al.*, 2022). More generally, after the austerity-driven management of the euro crisis, from the mid-2010s social issues were put back on the EU agenda (Crespy and Schmidt, 2017), and several euro-social initiatives were put forward, particularly after the pandemic (Vesan *et al.*, 2021).

And yet, we know the road to introducing euro 'eco' and social' initiatives is fraught with difficulties, having the EU formally little 'hard' competencies as regards social/public policies and facing severe limitations in developing beyond a 'regulatory' state. The fragmentation of political institutions, cultural and socio-economic heterogeneity, and the preemptive role of existing national (welfare) states have constrained the development of the bonding dimension of the EU polity (Obinger *et al.*, 2005; Sharpf, 2002). Moreover, the rise of Eurosceptic parties and voters has resulted in what has been termed a 'constraining dissensus' on further integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2009), so widespread support is needed to increase the scope of risk-pooling amongst member states (Beramendi and Stegmueller, 2020).

The social security logic may contribute to pushing forward EU policy centralisation, overcoming such deeply entrenched institutional and political obstacles. The recent literature demonstrated that crises may constitute windows of opportunity, relaxing the post-functional constraint and facilitating increased support for 'more' Europe (Kyriazi *et al.* 2023). The present study complements these works by exploring whether the Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered new demands for policy centralisation beyond the military domain. It posits that the collective security imperative induced by the invasion (Genschel 2022) and the ensuing concerns for rising energy prices may have triggered a transboundary crisis convincing EU citizens of the supranational functional advantages of responding to the three interrelated challenges of energy security, environmental sustainability, and equity.

In light of the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: The threat of war sparked citizens' support for EU-level energy and social policies.

Yet, there are trade-offs between these different policy areas (Fu *et al.*, 2021; Kuzemko *et al.*, 2022; Mandelli *et al.*, 2021). Focusing on public opinion, well-established territorial, socio-economic and political divides may create unsurmountable obstacles in pursuing all these policy goals. In light of the aforementioned constraining dissensus, it is crucial to investigate these divides because if not addressed any elite-driven efforts towards policy centralisation may have negative consequences.

The first divide is territorial. Citizens' EU-level policy preferences also depend on the country they live in (De Vries 2018). The gradual convergence towards a European climate-neutral agenda was politically contested, as Central and Eastern member states opposed the adoption of new targets committing to de-carbonisation, preferring to work towards energy supply security while insisting on national sovereignty over energy policies (Ringel and Knodt, 2018). Accordingly, Central-Eastern Europeans are less supportive of the climate-related aspects of EU energy policy (Tosun and Mišić, 2020), while a country's wealth is positively related to support for climate action on energy policy (Arıkan and Günay, 2021). Conversely, the latter correlates negatively with support for cross-national redistribution, as individuals tend to weigh the economic situation of their country relative to other member states (Baute and Pellegata, 2022). Thus, scholars have suggested that citizens in 'core' European countries typically oppose risk-sharing and cross-border redistribution in the EU (Beramendi and Stegmueller 2020; Walter *et al.* 2020). Consequently, we hypothesize:

H2a: In Eastern European countries, citizens are less likely to support investment in renewable energy sources.

H2b: In core European countries, citizens are less likely to support EU investment in social compensation mechanisms.

Scholars have also stressed that the main socio-economic constituencies supporting eco-friendly and social compensation mechanisms tend to diverge (Otto and Gugushvili, 2020). One strand of the literature has emphasised a utilitarian rationale: individuals favour supra-national social compensation mechanisms if they perceive a personal economic benefit, depending on their position in the income distribution (Gerhards *et al.*, 2019). The association between structural positions – such as labour market status and/or socio-economic conditions – and EU climate and energy policy are less widely researched. Nonetheless, some studies have noted a close relationship between these factors, as higher-income groups tend to be more in favour of climate change mitigation measures (Armingeon and Burgisser, 2021;

Otto and Gugushvili, 2020); at the same time, the unemployed are far less likely to prioritise environmental protection than those in full-time work (Kenny 2020).

In light of the above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: People with lower incomes and/or who are affected by increasing energy prices are less likely to support investment in renewable energy sources.

H3b: People with lower incomes and/or who are affected by increasing energy prices are more likely to support EU investment in social compensation mechanisms.

Finally, many studies have highlighted the importance of political ideology in individual preferences. People with left-wing views are more likely to be concerned about climate change (McCright *et al.*, 2015, Poortinga *et al.*, 2019), while those who support nationalist and right-wing populist parties tend to be climate-sceptic (Lockwood, 2018) and to oppose climate change mitigation policies (Kulin *et al.*, 2021), especially EU ones. Weko (2022) suggests that this ideological opposition is structural, epitomising a (cultural) cleavage between cosmopolitan vs. communitarian political values. Cosmopolitanism, altruism, leftist ideology, and European identity are all associated with support for EU integration and redistribution (Gerhards *et al.*, 2019). As is the case with (EU) climate policies, outright Eurosceptic positions may reduce support for European solidarity (Baute *et al.*, 2020).

In light of the above, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H4: People on the right (left) are less (more) likely to support investment in renewable energy sources and to support EU investment in social compensation mechanisms.

H5: Communitarians are less (more) likely to support investment in renewable energy sources (fossil fuels) and to support EU investment in social compensation mechanisms.

Data

The analysis is based on data from the second wave of a survey conducted within the framework of the SOLID project. The survey was conducted by YouGov in July 2022 in seven EU countries – Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Portugal – to maximise cross-country differences and exposure to the crisis.

To investigate citizens' energy and environmental preferences in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we asked respondents to register their level of agreement (on a 0–10 scale) with three different statements: 'EU member states should continue importing oil and gas from Russia'; 'EU member states should reduce their dependency on Russia by importing oil

and gas at the cheapest price available from other countries, even if this has costs in terms of climate sustainability'; and 'EU member states should reduce their energy dependency on Russia by investing in renewable sources, even at the cost of higher energy prices in the short term.' We also asked at which level their preferred energy policy should be pursued: 'Jointly at the EU level' or 'Independently by the [NATIONALITY] government.'

To measure preferences for social policies the EU might prioritise to tackle the consequences of rising energy prices, we asked respondents to choose one of four options: 'The EU should provide a significant amount of financial support to compensate workers who lose their jobs'; 'The EU should distribute a small amount of financial support equally to all citizens'; 'The EU should distribute financial support to affected companies'; and 'The EU should not take any action.' (See the Appendix for details on the questions, coding, and descriptive statistics).

The hypotheses are tested using regression models. Based on the nature of dependent variables, we ran linear regressions on the three variables measuring preferences for energy and environmental policy (rescaled to range from 0 to 1), a logistic regression on the preferred level at which energy policy should be decided, and a multinomial regression on preferences for EU-level social policies. We tested H1 using a binary variable to measure whether the respondents believed war to be the most significant threat to the EU. We controlled for two other perceived threats: climate change and poverty. We tested H3 by examining subjective household income, and a situational measure of the extent to which the respondents were affected by rising energy prices. We included left-right ideological self-placement (H4), trust in the national government, and exclusive national identity to separate communitarians (H5) from Euroropolitans, respondents sharing a mixed or exclusively European identity. Eventually, we included in all models a categorical variable tracking the country of respondents (with Germany as the reference) to control for contextual variation and test H2. (See the Appendix for the full list of covariates and their summary statistics.)

Analysis

For each factor considered, we proceed by evaluating its association with specific preferences for energy and social policies and for EU-capacity building in these two areas. We first examine the associations between war as the most significant threat and energy preferences to test H1. The left section of [Figure 1](#) displays linear regression coefficients on energy and environmental preferences of war being perceived as the most important threat. Respondents who perceived a security imperative favoured reducing fossil fuel imports from Russia and importing them from other countries and were even more disposed to investment in renewables. The fourth coefficient of

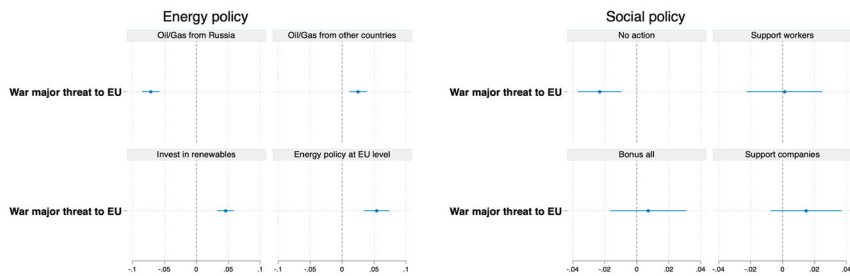


Figure 1 . Effects of the threat of war on energy and social preferences. *Note:* The left figure displays the coefficients from three linear regressions on energy options and the average marginal effect from a logistics regression on the preferred level of energy policy. The right figure displays average marginal effects from multinomial logistic regression for social policy. For the coefficients for all the models, see Appendix Tables A2, A3, and A4, respectively.

the left part of [Figure 1](#) shows that the threat of war created the post-functional condition for backing more energy policy integration, regardless of respondents' policy preference. The right panel in [Figure 1](#) reveals instead that respondents who perceived the war as a threat were significantly more in favour of supranational compensation for citizens, workers, and companies and tackling the transboundary crisis in rising energy prices. Still, they did not have a clear-cut preference for a particular intervention (i.e., either a universal bonus for all citizens or support for workers or companies).

On the whole, it appears that the perception of the threat posed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the EU has pushed the respondents to support polity-building in energy and social dimensions, with their preferred option being investing in renewable resources at the EU level and the introduction of euro-compensation mechanisms.

The second set of hypotheses aimed to test whether the territorial politics of energy and social policy aligned or diverged – i.e., whether some territorial constituencies were more in favour of EU interventions in the energy and social spheres and whether they were consistent across policy areas. With the exception of Hungary, there was very little support for continuing to import fossil fuels from Russia; and with the exception of Germany, most of the respondents believed that the current crisis represented an opportunity to invest in renewable resources rather than continue importing fossil fuels from other countries, even at the cost of higher energy prices during the transition ([Figure A1](#) in the Appendix). Finally, the majority of respondents favoured direct EU intervention in the form of financial redistribution to mitigate the consequences of rising energy prices ([Figure A3](#) in the Appendix).

[Figure 2](#), which presents the country-specific coefficients (with Germany as the reference), confirms that territorial divisions exist, but they do not always

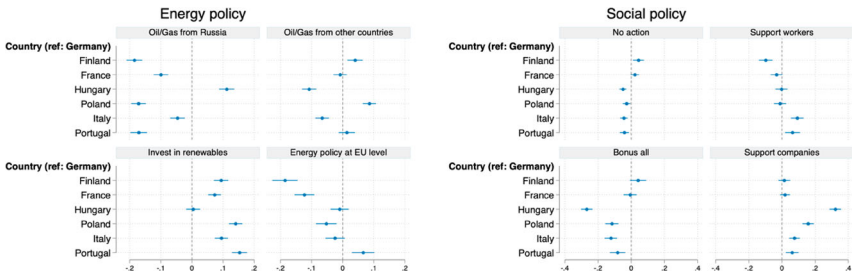


Figure 2. Country differences in energy and social preferences. Note: The left panel displays coefficients from three linear regressions on energy options and average marginal effects on the preferred level of energy policy. The right panel displays average marginal effects based on a multinomial logistic regression.

align with our expectations. In the case of H2a, Poland and Portugal returned one of the strongest positive associations with support for renewable energies. The former was one of the most sceptical member-states on environmental transition, but it seems that the war in Ukraine skewed its citizens towards support for renewables. Similar support is found in Finland and Portugal but, against expectations, not in Germany. Low support amongst Hungarian respondents is not surprising given the growing rift between their country and the rest of the EU.

Lending support to H2b, respondents from the peripheral member states of the South (Portugal and Italy) and the East (Hungary and Poland) are less supportive of the EU taking no action to tackle the socioeconomic consequences of rising energy prices compared with the core countries (France, Germany, and Finland). There are also noteworthy territorial divergences regarding the type of EU social intervention: demands for support for workers losing their jobs are strongest in the South. Citizens from the core countries tend to prefer a universalistic solution (a bonus for all households) compared with the other member states. Finally, support for companies hit by rising energy prices find more support in the East. Regional patterns may relate to welfare provisions already available in the respective countries following a benchmarking logic (De Vries 2018) and to the redistributive implications between member states.

Our third strand of hypotheses focused on whether the socio-economic constituencies in favour of climate-neutral and social compensation EU policies aligned. The results presented in Figure 3 lend support to H3a: respondents living in situations of (perceived) economic scarcity tend to oppose both the importation of fossil fuels from other countries and investment in renewables. Those affected by rising energy prices favour fossil fuel importation from Russia and other countries. Economic deprivation does not correspond with preferences for vertical integration in energy policy. The results

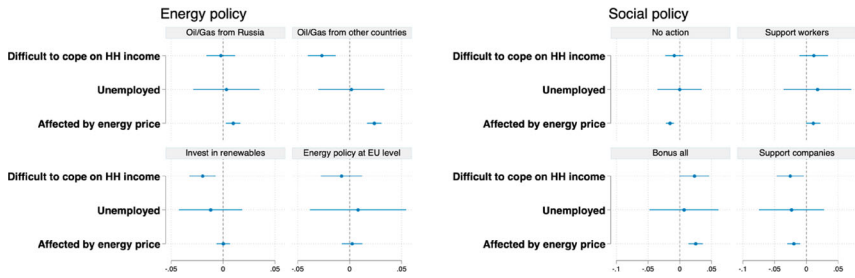


Figure 3 . Effects of economic deprivation on energy and social preferences. *Note:* The left panel displays coefficients from three linear regressions on energy options and average marginal effects on the preferred level of energy policy. The right panel displays average marginal effects from a multinomial logistic regression.

also lend support to H3b; respondents living in harsher economic conditions and those disproportionately affected by rising energy prices tend to support more universalistic solutions than compensation for companies.

As to political orientations, a clear and consistent ideological divide emerges across policy areas. Respondents with right-wing views and communitarians are more in favour of importing fossil fuels from Russia and less in favour of investment in renewable sources and euro-social initiatives. Both groups are staunchly opposed to further energy and social policy integration.

Overall, the findings confirm that territorial and socio-economic constituencies in favour of EU climate-neutral and social compensation policies diverge. The last panel of [Figure 4](#) confirms this result. It offers an insight into the relationship between the issues by including the average marginal effects of the three (standardised) scales measuring support for the three energy options. These are associated with support for different supranational welfare provisions. Respondents who express a preference for more investment in renewable energies tend to favour EU interventions that help

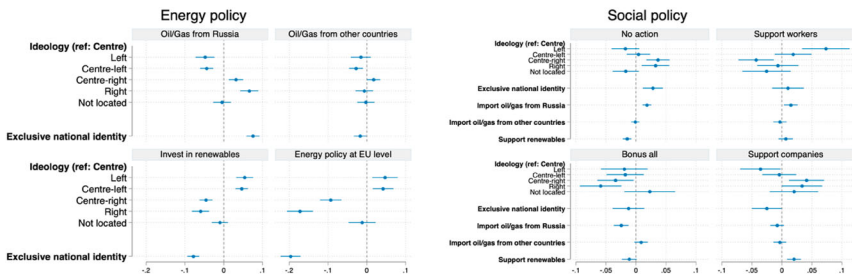


Figure 4 . Effects of political orientation on energy and social preferences. *Note:* The left panel displays coefficients from three linear regressions on energy options and average marginal effects on the preferred level of energy policy. The right panel displays average marginal effects from a multinomial logistic regression.

companies in need rather than social compensation. By contrast, a preference for continuing importation of fossil fuels from Russia increases the probability of support for a cash transfer to workers. These findings suggest the emergence of an eco-social divide in Europe; citizens who support climate mitigation policies conflict with those who support social compensation policies (Otto and Gugushvili, 2020).

Discussion

Reacting to the seminal work by Kelemen and McNamara (2022), recent contributions questioned the idea that polity building can only – or even mainly – follow from the external security logic, suggesting that concerns for social security may drive and shape EU polity-formation (Ferrera *et al.* 2023: 7). Building on this insight, the present study examined the degree to which the Russia invasion of Ukraine, ensuing growing concerns about prosperity, ecological and social safety, created post-functional conditions for EU polity-building in non-military domains by assessing citizens' energy security, ecological sustainability, and equity preferences. The results revealed that the respondents who perceived the war as the most pressing threat to the EU favoured a supranational response to the aforementioned; i.e., they supported EU efforts to end dependence on Russian energy supplies, fast-forwarding the green transition by investing in renewable energy, and institutionalising EU solidarity through the introduction of euro-social compensation mechanisms.

While the majority of respondents supports energy and social policy centralisation, there is no policy-specific 'rally-round-the-flag' effect. Tensions remain visible, possibly because of the redistributive implications of the policies considered. Respondents in different countries, those who occupy different income strata, and those who hold different political views share different and sometimes conflicting preferences on energy and social policy. In particular, respondents under economic strain oppose climate mitigation energy policies because they are concerned about their distributional consequences. Consequently, they demand EU-level social protection, especially in the South, while households in better economic conditions share contrasting priorities. It is worth noting that communitarians tend to support less EU intervention in all three dimensions of the trilemma. In other words, this group seems to be less affected by the social security logic and prefers national-level solutions. Also, conservatives share similar views, while the European left has a special responsibility (and opportunity) of crafting a proposal allowing to overcome such multi-dimensional conflict in the EU.

So far, the EC launched with the REpowerEU plan a series of initiatives to end dependence on Russian fossil fuels and to accelerate the green transition, while being less effective in responding to the social consequences of the war. Failure to respond adequately to all three interrelated demands for

more Europe may however have a high cost for the EU. In conclusion, the results indicate that the EU has to perform a juggling act if it is to manage successfully energy security and decarbonisation without exacerbating societal divisions within and between member states. A failure to address the distributive concerns of those at the bottom of the income scale may jeopardise supranational efforts to reach a climate-neutral economy and further polarise public opinions. This may have long-term consequences for the European integration project as a whole, as the crisis may easily spill over into a political crisis and eventually into a (new) crisis of legitimacy.

Notes

1. In 2020, the EU depended on Russia for 24.4% of its energy needs (Eurostat database).
2. See <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/who-suffering-most-rising-inflation>.

Disclosure statement

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