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EUROPEAN UNION POLICY AND REGULATORY PROSPECTS ON THE WAY TO SUSTAINABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY FUTURE

ABSTRACT

The energy transition in North Macedonia must inevitably follow the path of the European Union (EU) Energy Union strategic document and the corresponding Action Plans, as well as of the Clean Energy for all Europeans legislative package. This obligation comes from the Energy Community Treaty and other ratified international agreements that are relevant to the sector, as well as from the strategic interests in the energy sector, which are affirmed with the National Strategy for Energy Development until 2040. On this path, it is the national policymakers' and stakeholders' responsibility to respect the techno-economic specificities of existing energy systems and to achieve a transition that ultimately benefits society. All stakeholders in the country should firstly recognise the necessity of the electricity sector transformation to achieve a sustainable future and then to collaborate in achieving the common goals. In addition, the prevailing energy poverty in the country must not be disregarded, but instead overcome in a just manner.

This paper presents the way to a sustainable energy future as seen from the perspective of the EU strategic energy documents and legislative package, which are continuously updated to reflect the current challenges and state of development. Namely, the developments in the recent years, both considering the achievements by the EU Member States and the international energy and financial crisis caused by Russian invasion to Ukraine, is prompting the EU to establish higher and higher renewables and energy efficiency goals to achieve its own and the related Energy Union countries satisfactory energy security standards. North Macedonia should follow the efforts of its neighbours and alliances.

Keywords: EU Energy Strategy, Action Plan, just transition, sustainable future, energy security

1 INTRODUCTION

The most recent EU Energy Strategy, developed during the Juncker Commission's tenure (2014-2019), is known as the Energy Union [1]. This document represents a continuation to the European Energy Security Strategy that was adopted in 2014 [2]. Its primary aim can be articulated as follows: to establish an Energy Union that ensures security, sustainability, and competitiveness in the supply of energy to EU consumers (both households and businesses) at affordable prices.

This paper provides an overview of the strategic documents starting from the Energy Union, followed by the EU Energy Union Action Plans, which aim to mobilise the implementation of the Strategy. Namely, it considers the Green Deal [3], Fit for 55 and REPowerEU [4]. Each of them has established increasingly ambitious goals for renewable energy and energy efficiency, with REPowerEU being the most demanding. This initiative represents a comprehensive set of measures aimed at

accelerating the transition towards a clean and sustainable future for both the EU and its neighbouring regions. It was formulated in response to the most recent energy crisis and the conflict in Ukraine.

In addition to the aforementioned Action Plans, the EU has introduced an Action Plan focused on the digitalization of the energy system [5]. The objective here is to develop and operate energy systems that are digitalized, environmentally friendly, and robust to various disruptions.

All of these documents have a common objective – to create the necessary conditions for further development of the energy systems as sustainable and environmentally friendly, harnessing clean energy from all available sources on one hand, and decreasing energy use by effective energy efficiency measures on the other hand. This paper considers the main legislative requirements and implications emerging from the implementation of the strategic documents, which are discussed in the following sections.

2 ENERGY UNION STRATEGY

The Energy Union has been developed along and in complementarity with nine other strategies in a single integrated system of initiatives and activities aiming to notably modernise the economy of the EU. The role and compatibility of the Energy Union with the other strategies is presented in Figure 1 [3].

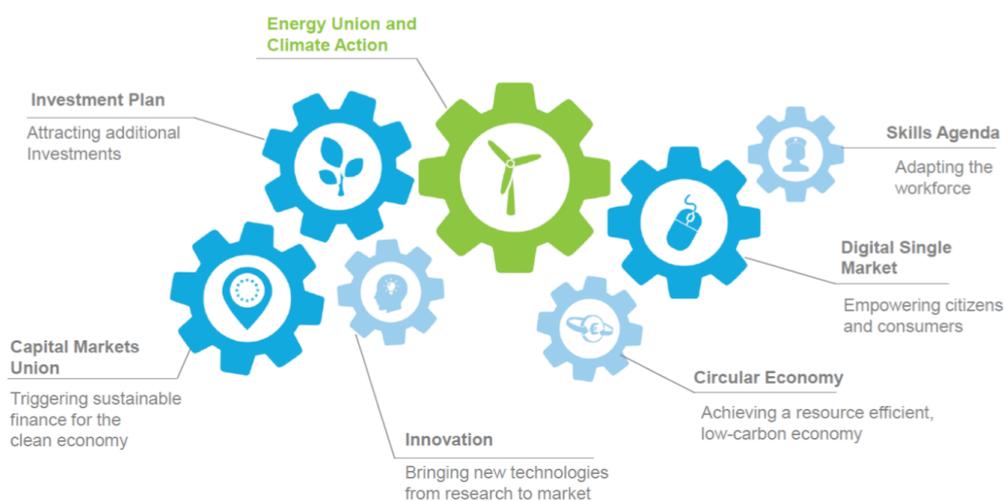


Figure 1 Modernisation of the economy – central role of the Energy Union and climate action [3]

The energy sector is essential within the European economy. The costs associated with specific energy sources have a direct impact on the overall competitiveness of the economy. Historically, these energy costs have constituted roughly 6% of annual household expenses. Moreover, the energy sector serves as a source of employment for nearly 2.2 million individuals across approximately 90,000 European businesses. This thriving sector is supported by a robust manufacturing industry that supplies essential equipment and services not only within Europe, but also on a global scale. The advancement of Renewable Energy Sources (RES) and energy-efficient products and services stimulates the emergence of fresh economic activities and services throughout Europe, thereby creating new employment opportunities for all Europeans [3].

The implementation of the Energy Union is anticipated to accelerate the transition to clean energy, leading to increased economic growth and job opportunities. By mobilizing an additional 177 billion euros in both public and private investments between 2021 and 2030, this Strategy is projected to contribute to a potential 1% rise in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over the next decade and to creation of approximately 900,000 new jobs. Furthermore, it is expected to reduce the carbon intensity of the EU's economy by an average of 43% by 2030, with RES accounting for roughly half of the EU's electricity generation mix [3].

The Energy Union consists of five related and reinforcing dimensions that aim to contribute to increased energy security, sustainability, and competitiveness [1]:

- Ensuring energy security, solidarity, and trust: Achieved through diversifying energy sources and enhancing energy supply security in Europe, primarily through collaborative efforts and solidarity among EU Member States;
- Establishing a fully integrated European Energy Market: enabling the flow of energy across the EU by developing the necessary infrastructure while eliminating technical and regulatory barriers;
- Promoting energy efficiency for reducing demand: By reducing reliance on imported electricity, cutting greenhouse gas emissions, and stimulating economic growth and job creation, energy efficiency plays a pivotal role in this endeavour;
- Combating climate change and decarbonizing the economy: The EU is dedicated to ratification of the Paris Agreement and maintaining its leadership in adopting RES, all aimed at reducing the impact of climate change and achieving a low-carbon economy;
- Supporting research, innovation, and competitiveness: Fostering the development of low-carbon and environmentally friendly technologies for secondary energy production by directing research and innovative solutions towards advancing the energy transition and bolstering competitiveness.

The promotion of the Energy Union was supported by several packages with various measures and its implementation is regularly followed to ensure that key priorities are achieved.

2.1 Clean Energy for all Europeans Legislative Package

One of the pivotal steps in supporting the EU Energy Union Strategy involves the adoption of the most recent legislative framework for energy and climate, known as the Clean Energy for all Europeans Package (CEP). This package was approved in 2019 with its primary objective being to facilitate EU's energy system decarbonization. Within the framework of the new Governance Regulation of the Energy Union and Climate Action (Governance Regulation) [6], which is an integral part of the CEP, the EU has established demanding climate targets for 2030. These targets include that 32% of all energy generated within the EU originates from RES, improving energy efficiency by at least 32.5% compared to 2007 levels, and reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 40% compared to 1990 levels. Upon successful attainment of these targets, GHG emissions could potentially decrease by up to 45%. The Governance Regulation and the remaining components of the CEP collectively create a common regulatory framework encompassing climate and energy matters. This framework serves as the foundation for collaborative planning and achievement of the specified targets by 2030, promoting a transition towards a cost-effective, climate-neutral economy that offers equal opportunities for all EU citizens.

The mandatory integrated National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs)¹, which cover ten-year periods, starting from the 2021–2030 period, are the mechanism which should ensure the achievement of the targets defined in the Governance Regulation [6]. These plans encompass national long-term strategies and encompass an integrated approach to reporting, monitoring, and data publication, all harmonized at the EU level. To ensure transparency, the NECPs are subject to extensive public discussions following each plan's development. Within the governance structure of the Energy Union and climate action, NECPs hold a pivotal role. Their primary aim is to offer the economic and financial sectors as much predictability and insight into the process as possible, with the ultimate goal of encouraging the necessary private investments.

¹ National energy and climate plans (NECPs), https://ec.europa.eu/energy/topics/energy-strategy/national-energy-climate-plans_en

3 ENERGY UNION STRATEGY ACTION PLANS

3.1 The Green Deal

Considering the growing evidence on climate changes, the European Parliament declared an emergency climate state in Europe and globally on 28 November 2019. This has created the environment to start implementation of activities for adoption of new regulatory and budget proposals which aimed to limit global warming to maximum of 1.5°C. Just within days after declaring the emergency climate state, on 11 December 2019, the EC has published the European Green Deal.

The European Green Deal [3] is a roadmap to achieve a sustainable economy across the EU, building on the Energy Union. The objectives of the Green Deal² are multi-fold, aiming to stop the GHG emissions by 2050, to decouple the use of resources and economic growth without leaving anyone or any place behind in the process.

This can be achieved if climate challenges observed in all the established policies of the EU are converted into opportunities, given that a just and inclusive policy is enabled for all. Figure 3 presents all different elements of the Green Deal.

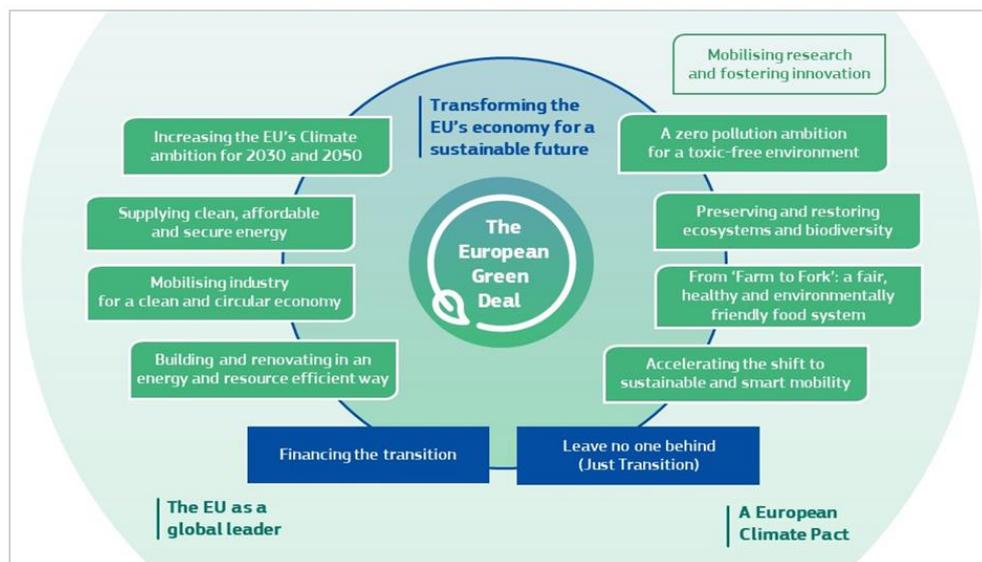


Figure 2 European Green Deal, [3]

The fulfilment of the European Green Deal's objectives requires a collective commitment of all economic sectors. These efforts encompass various actions, such as investing in environmentally friendly technologies, supporting innovative industries, expanding the utilization of clean, cost-effective, and health-conscious private and public transportation, transitioning towards a decarbonized energy sector, ensuring enhanced energy efficiency within buildings, and engaging in cooperative ventures with international partners to enhance global environmental standards.

The roadmap, which outlines essential actions, is made available as an Annex to the European Green Deal [7]. Its successful implementation should help deliver the following outcomes: promoting more efficient utilization of resources through the adoption of a clean, circular economy model, and concurrently, mitigating pollution levels while fostering the restoration of biodiversity.

The EU has set in motion financial support and technical assistance to people, enterprises, and regions most affected by the transition to a clean economy. This is called the Fair Transition Mechanism, which should provide at least 100 billion EUR for the most affected regions during the 2021 - 2027 period. The European Green Deal investment plan [8] describes the need for investments and the available financial tools. It also explains how the promised just and inclusive policy can be ensured.

² European Green Deal, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy_en

3.2 Fit for 55

The Fit for 55 package³ complements the Green Deal by encompassing a series of proposals designed to review and update EU legislation while introducing new initiatives. Its overarching objective is to align EU policies with the enhanced climate objectives agreed upon by the Council and the European Parliament, specifically to aid in achieving the reinforced EU target of reducing GHG emissions by a minimum of 55% by 2030.

The Fit for 55 package was submitted to the Council in July 2021 and spans over multiple policy areas. These encompass environment, energy, transport, as well as economic and financial matters. This package encompasses a diverse array of proposals on measures that collectively address essential aspects of the EU's climate and sustainability objectives. These legislative proposals cover: revision on the EU emissions trading system, measures to further promote use of RES, energy efficiency and energy performance of buildings. In addition, the proposals encompass introducing reforms in energy taxation, carbon border adjustment mechanism and social climate fund. The package also considers proposals related to alternative fuels infrastructure, CO₂ emission standards for cars and vans and initiatives as RefuelEU aviation and FuelEU maritime.

As mentioned in the text above, this package considers a revision of the Renewable Energy Directive. It foresees a new RES target in the overall energy mix, i.e., the use of RES should be at least 40% by 2030, compared to the current EU-level target of at least 32% of RES in the overall energy mix. Taking a horizontal approach, this proposal considers introducing or enhancing sectoral sub-targets and measures. More efforts will be put forward to sectors that have shown slower RES use uptake, such as transport, buildings, and industry. The proposal was agreed at the level of EU energy ministers on 27 June 2022.

3.3 REPowerEU

Faced with the post-Covid energy crisis and the conflict in Ukraine, the EU has set the REPowerEU plan, aiming to decrease the dependence on Russian fossil fuels as well as to speed up the green transition^{4,5} by 2027. The REPowerEU plan [4] was adopted on 18 May 2022, accompanied by a corresponding Action plan [9] that clarifies its implementation and energy savings subplans [10] . The following documents were also included: a new Electricity Market Design [11], the EU Solar Strategy [12] and the activities on External Energy Engagement [13]⁶.

The REPowerEU introduces complementary actions related to security of supply and storage of energy, building on the Fit for 55 package. It also introduces a number of actions related to saving energy, diversification of supply and rapid substitution of fossil fuels by combining investments and reforms, as presented in Figure 3, below.

³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/green-deal/fit-for-55-the-eu-plan-for-a-green-transition/>

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_3131

⁵ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/repowereu-affordable-secure-and-sustainable-energy-europe_en

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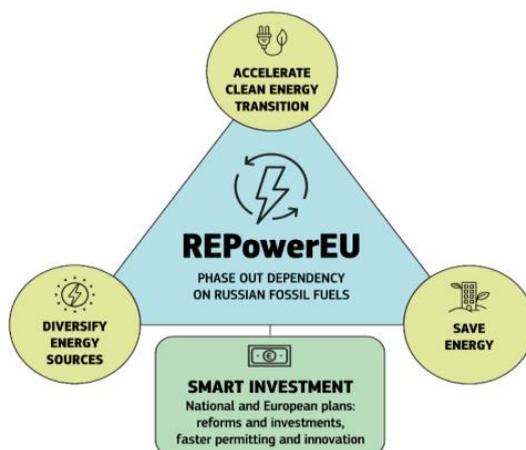


Figure 3 Additional set of actions within REPowerEU to achieve independence from Russian fossil fuels by 2027, [4]

The measures outlined within the REPowerEU Plan encompass a range of actions focused on energy savings, diversification of energy supply sources, and the fast expansion of renewable energy as substitute for fossil fuels across residential, industrial, and power generation sectors. The implementation of these measures is reinforced through the support of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) [14], which serves as the foundation for executing the REPowerEU Plan by providing additional funding from the EU.

To align with the REPowerEU priorities and facilitate the necessary reforms, Member States are encouraged to incorporate a dedicated REPowerEU chapter within their respective Recovery and Resilience Plans. These chapters should serve for directing investments towards the objectives of the REPowerEU Plan. Funding for the REPowerEU initiative is drawn from various sources, including the remaining RRF loans, which presently amount to €225 billion, and new RRF grants generated through the auctioning of Emission Trading System allowances, currently held in the Market Stability Reserve, with a total worth of €20 billion. Additionally, funding sources encompass Cohesion Policy funds, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the Connecting Europe Facility, the Innovation Fund, as well as both national and EU financial support dedicated to advancing the goals of the REPowerEU initiative, supplemented by national fiscal measures.

The REPowerEU Plan has put forth a comprehensive set of short-term initiatives, which were completed by the end of 2022. These included the EU Save Energy Communication [15], providing recommendations for citizens and businesses to save approximately 13 bcm of gas imports. A swift rollout of solar and wind energy projects coupled with renewable hydrogen deployment aimed to save roughly 50 bcm of gas imports [12]. The approval of the first EU-wide hydrogen projects was targeted by summer 2022. Additionally, efforts were made to increase biomethane production to save 17 bcm of gas imports, facilitate collective purchases of gas, LNG, and hydrogen via the EU Energy Platform, and establish new energy partnerships with reliable suppliers. Further measures encompassed EU-coordinated demand reduction plans in the event of gas supply disruptions and a drive to fill gas storage to 80% capacity by November 1, 2022.

In line with its primary objective, the Plan also outlines medium-term actions to be completed by 2027. These involve raising the EU-wide energy efficiency target for 2030 from 9% to 13% and increasing the European renewables target from 40% to 45%. Moreover, it anticipates new legislation and recommendations for faster renewables permitting, particularly in dedicated 'go-to areas' with low environmental impact [16]. Amendments to the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD) are slated to ensure that public and tertiary buildings are solar rooftop-ready by 2027.

The Plan further envisions new national REPowerEU Plans, under the modified RRF [14], to support investments and reforms, worth of €300 billion. It emphasizes investments in an integrated and adapted gas and electricity infrastructure network, promoting industrial decarbonization with

approximately €3 billion allocated to frontloaded projects through the Innovation Fund. Additionally, it outlines proposals to secure industry access to critical raw materials and regulatory measures to enhance energy efficiency within the transport sector. A hydrogen accelerator initiative aims to establish 17.5 GW of electrolyzers by 2025 to fuel EU industry with homegrown production of 10 million tonnes of renewable hydrogen. Lastly, a modern regulatory framework for hydrogen is also part of the Plan's objectives. These measures are complemented by the Action Plan for Short-Term Market Interventions and Market Design [11] and the Strategy on International Energy Engagement [13]. The EU climate and energy targets can be achieved if private financing and investments are also attracted. It is expected that achieving the 2030 Energy and Climate targets would require funding of €3,000 billion by 2030, which is to be accomplished with 10-15% of public funding (EU and National Funds) and 85-90% of private investments.

3.4 Digitalising the energy system – EU Action Plan

The EU's Action Plan on Digitalizing the Energy System [5] is designed to streamline the energy transition by supporting the transition of energy systems into digitally advanced, environmentally friendly, and robust systems. Digital technologies play a substantial role in introducing new services and prospects for customers, industries, and ensuring the resilience and efficiency of supply chains. Throughout this transformation, it is crucial to facilitate accessibility to and the exchange of energy-related data, all while upholding the utmost security and privacy safeguards for data protection.

The development of a digitalized, environmentally sustainable, and resilient energy system will receive support through a series of initiatives outlined in [5]. These include promoting connectivity and interoperability to facilitate data exchange among various stakeholders, encouraging investments in energy systems, and expediting the widespread adoption of digital solutions across the EU. Empowering consumers to fully harness the advantages of digital services is also a priority, alongside increasing cybersecurity measures through more streamlined protection efforts and investments. Moreover, the energy efficiency of digital solutions is a key consideration, along with continued efforts in governance and planning to sustain learning and digital skill gain for all participants.

Enhancing cybersecurity within energy systems necessitates a comprehensive and rational approach that carefully weighs the requirements and costs associated with mitigating cybersecurity risks. The Action Plan [5] acknowledges the EU's systematic approach to strengthening the cybersecurity capabilities of energy networks, especially through initiatives like the new Directive on Cybersecurity of network and information systems (NIS2 Directive) [17], the new Directive on the resilience of critical entities (CER) [18], as well as the proposal for the new Network Code on Cyber Security and the legislative proposal adopted under the Cyber Resilience Act.

The EU Action Plan on Digitalising the Energy System [5] sets a priority on the needed investments in digital electricity infrastructure. The first important steps are related to the development of the digital twin of the European electricity grid, for which the transmission and distribution system operators should get support from the European Commission. The core activities in this regard include [5]: “(i) observability and controllability; (ii) efficient infrastructure and network planning; (iii) operations and simulations for a more resilient grid; (iv) active system management and forecasting to support flexibility and demand response; and (v) data exchange between TSOs and DSOs.” The process should be actively promoted through the efforts of national regulatory authorities. Their responsibilities should encompass defining the components of efficient investments in digitalization, setting incentives for system operators, and collaborating closely with ACER to formulate standardized smart grid indicators. These metrics should be designed to empower regulatory bodies with the means to oversee investments and assess the advancements made towards the creation of a digital twin for the European electricity network.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents the strategic framework that should support the transition towards clean energy and provide sufficient mechanisms to combat climate change. EU has been highly ambitious in introducing RES in the past 20 years, achieving the common targets and boosting the RES industry. Due to these actions, some of the RES technologies have developed to the point where no support is required

for investments. The approach on setting high targets and devising coherent mechanisms to finance the means to achieve these targets continues in the latest set of strategic documents, starting with the Energy Union, followed by the Green Deal, Fit for 55 and RePowerEU, alongside the complementary Action Plans and legislative proposals. It remains to be seen how the implementation of these actions will evolve in the following years. In addition, it is expected that the digitalization of the energy sector will have a huge impact on consumers, who would benefit from this process as new services would empower them to make informed decisions on participation in energy efficiency programs, demand response, or participation in energy communities. The process of digitalization would require raising consumer awareness towards cyber threats and the need for implementation of the appropriate personal data protection measures. Furthermore, the process of digitalization would require reskilling of workforce and development of programs for digital skills development so that engineers and other professionals working in the energy sector would be able to cope with the challenges ahead.

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