

Change of focus on EU energy policy driven by crisis and insecurity woes

Written by Morten Helveg Petersen on 12 June 2015 in Opinion
Opinion

The European Commission needs to step in and take action against EU member states that fail to deliver on their energy obligations, argues Morten Helveg Petersen.



This is a truly exciting time to be working on energy policy. The European commission's vision on building an 'energy union' and their plans to implement it are long overdue.

After all, the EU was effectively born from the idea of coordinating energy and industrial policies between the six founding member states, and yet today we still do not have anything close to a European single market for energy or a coherent external policy when it comes to our energy imports.

The impetus to finally change this - as is the case with most important progressions in the development of the EU - stems from crisis and insecurity.

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Climate change, the economic crisis and perhaps most importantly of all, the imminent threat of disruption to our energy imports due to the situations in Ukraine, north Africa and the Middle East, mean it is absolutely crucial that we fundamentally change the way we produce, distribute and consume energy.

Clearly an important part of dealing with these challenges is to develop a genuine synergy between the EU institutions and industry in order to get finance moving for the vital infrastructure and research that needs to take place.

There are so many projects for sustainable energy out there, so many technologies - not just low or zero carbon fuels, but technologies that make that fuel go further.

For example, combined heat and power feeding into district heating systems in Poland is helping coal to be a more efficient fuel, by ensuring that the energy released from burning it is harnessed and used as much as possible.

These kinds of efficiencies are helping to make our economy more competitive and more sustainable, both environmentally and economically.

But many of these projects are unable to go ahead because of a lack of finance. The European fund for strategic investments can help, but we need to find ways to make smaller projects 'bankable' so that lenders know that they can make an investment and get a return, and aren't worried about policy changing six months down the line.

So what else can the EU do? We can show leadership, share best practices and we can facilitate exchanges, but most important is ensuring that national governments face up to their responsibilities in all this.

For too long, member states have resisted setting targets to improve efficiency or deal with the issue of sustainability in their energy mixes.

When targets were agreed, governments did their best to avoid having to actually deliver, as is evidenced by the weak council conclusions on the EU 2030 targets, which essentially say, 'we have no interest in delivering on energy transition or a sustainable future'.

The commission has the opportunity - and in my view, the obligation - to put an end to this. Member states should be offered technical and financial support to meet their objectives, and if there are any regulatory barriers or problems with legislation, they should receive support to find ways around them.

At the same time, when member states refuse to do anything to reach such targets, the commission must step in and take action, launching infringement procedures and prompting a change. In the long

run,

European citizens will thank us for being tough, and responding to their demands for cleaner energy, warmer homes and a healthier environment for them and their children.

About the author

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