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Study | 19.07.2023 | 13:00 - 14:30

Tackling the immediate challenges of energy poverty in the Western Balkans

The possible role for the EU

- Download the study (PDF)

Introductory remarks

It is evident that the geopolitical landscape of the world, particularly in Europe, has experienced a significant transformation with the commencement of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its people. This war represents a direct assault on the established rules-based order and poses a threat to peace, security, and stability on the European continent. It has become crucial for the EU to adapt its foreign and security policies, including its neighbourhood and enlargement policy, in response to this challenge to European security and the EU's role as a geopolitical actor.

This watershed moment has brought about a realization in Brussels, Berlin, Paris, The Hague, and other capitals about the geostrategic imperative of integrating the Western Balkan region into the European Union. The EU's previous lack of engagement, credibility, and its unfulfilled promises in the enlargement processes, along with a lack of genuine political will for fundamental reforms in some Western Balkan countries, has created room for Russian and Chinese interference, which EU leaders have finally awakened to. Furthermore, the lack of progress and a realistic prospect of EU integration has fuelled growing frustration among the citizens of the six Western Balkan countries, which requires urgent attention.

In the wake of Russia's war of aggression, the Western Balkan partners have demonstrated solidarity with Ukraine, with most of them aligning with EU sanctions against Russia and proving to be valuable and reliable allies for the EU. In return, the EU must exhibit solidarity with these countries and their citizens, who are also heavily affected by the repercussions of Russia's aggression.

During the Greens/EFA group's visit to Skopje last October, one of the main takeaways was that, similar to many EU member states, the rise in energy prices is one of the most direct and visible consequences of the Russian war against Ukraine. Given the region's economic capacity compared to the EU27, the impact

of these price increases should not be underestimated. Economic instability serves as a breeding ground for social unrest and political instability, and it may even jeopardize the long-term support of citizens for Ukraine and the sanctions against Russia. Illiberal actors, particularly those supported by Russia, are eager to exploit any tensions in the societies.

Hence, it is evident to us that offering and supporting sustainable solutions to the energy crisis in the region is in the EU's best interest, as it serves three primary purposes. Firstly, it combats economic and social instability in the region and provides an opportunity to demonstrate tangible solidarity with the region and its citizens, thereby revitalizing the EU accession process. Secondly, it facilitates a sustainable energy transition in the region, which is crucial for ensuring a clean and healthy future for its citizens. Lastly, it is necessary to ensure the long-term unity, support, and solidarity of Europe with Ukraine in its resistance against Russian aggression and defence of freedom and European values.

Based on these reasons, the Cluster International Affairs of the Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament has commissioned this study, which aims to outline current EU-Western Balkan energy cooperation schemes and propose a concrete set of recommendations, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable group affected: the energy poor.

The DNA of our political group, which has always been deeply committed to the enlargement of the EU, is rooted in green and social values that we stand for. These values serve as the foundation of our policy, and this study aims to demonstrate how they can be integrated into the EU's energy policy towards the Western Balkans. By offering concrete solutions and tangible improvements for the citizens, we aim to secure a sustainable, green, and socially responsible future for the region within the EU.

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Reinhard Bütikofer (Greens/EFA MEP and Foreign Affairs coordinator)

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