

AUSTRIAN ENERGY SECURITY AND ITS POSITION TOWARDS EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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Abstract:

The paper deals with Austrian position towards deepening of integration in energy security area within the European Union. It utilizes theoretical approach based on three challenges of energy security (external, intra-EU and business challenges) to explore support or opposition towards the integration. The paper is based on 15 semi-structured interviews with Austrian senior officials as well as energy experts from think-tanks. The results support the claim that the rather neutral position of Austria towards deepening of integration in energy security area at the EU level is caused by the ability of the country to successfully deal with all three energy security challenges.

Keywords:

Austria, European union, Energy security, Challenges, Integration.

This paper presents results from a research of energy security preferences of small member states within the European Union. It is a case study focusing on Austria and its position towards deepening of integration in energy security at the EU level. The research question asks when do small member states support transfer of competence in energy security area on the EU level and when they oppose it. I assume that the advocacy and resistance towards integration in energy security depends on the ability of the small member states to deal with three challenges in this area – external, intra-EU and business challenge. These challenges are characteristic for small member states of the EU as they are restricted in their activities and influence by their

limited political power within the EU, but also unequal position vis-à-vis their external energy suppliers and energy business. The main assumption of the paper is that those small EU states that are able to deal with these challenges do not support deepening of integration in energy security area while those that are experiencing difficulties do promote transfer of competences in energy security area as they perceive the EU as a suitable area for coping with their challenges.

The paper is organized as following. After this introduction the second part presents brief literature overview and discusses two main concepts of the research, namely small member state and energy security, before proceeds with analytical framework used for explaining support and opposition of small EU members towards deepening of integration in energy security area. Moreover, it offers short notes on empirical data collection. The third part utilizes the proposed framework for an analysis of Austrian energy security preferences within the EU and it compares them with preferences the country pursues at the EU level. Conclusion summarizes the main findings of the paper.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Three Challenges of Energy Security and Integration

The lack of interest in energy at the EU level mirrored also in the shortage of academic writings on this topic until the late 1990. The seminal work written by Matlár (1997) on the role of the Commission in the development of the EU policy on energy stress this point. Using Putnam's two level game approach she concludes that the Commission and the European Court of Justice "wield a direct influence" on policy

making in this area (Matlár, 1997, p. 133) and thus she proposed to go beyond this intergovernmental approach towards multi-level analysis. Mayer (2008) supports such findings by claiming that the Commission used periods between interstate bargaining to "informally exploit its own institutional position" (Mayer, 2008, p. 270) what cause that it gained more powers than the Member States were originally willing to transfer to it. Such development is in contradiction with liberal intergovernmental assumptions about "rational governments fully aware of their decision's consequences" and Mayer therefore argues in favour of path-dependency of historical neo-institutionalism (2008, p. 253). However, not all scholars agree with such views, Bohzilova and Hashimoto claim that the EU policy on energy "demonstrates the constraints on the powers of the European Commission" (2010, p. 633).

Path-dependency was used also to explain energy preferences of member states. National energy strategies stem from "different historic trajectories developing out of national specifics" (Baumann and Simmerl, 2011, p. 8). So response to oil crisis in 1970s or communist legacies of the new members narrow possible preferences. Experiences with energy suppliers on direction of energy policy were examined also by Roth on the case of Poland that is significantly influenced by "broader geopolitical objectives" (2011, p. 620). Besides that, also business and perceived energy security can influence preferences concerning internal energy market, as shown by Pointvogl (2009). Verhoeff and Niemann analysed, how presidency of the Council of the EU can influence energy preferences. Germany was very keen before its presidency in 2007 to transfer "the interdependence between Germany and Russia into an interdependence between the EU and Russia" (2011, p. 1280). However, due to the opposition of the new EU member states and the role of mediator that the presidency entails decided Germany that it will not pursue this goal.

The two most important concepts for this paper are small member states and energy security. Therefore I will deal with them at this point and try to provide suitable definitions as scholars sometimes fail to do it (Björkdahl, 2008; Jakobsen, 2009; Sodupe and Benito, 2001; Youngs, 2009). Both terms are used rather vaguely and there is no single definition of small member state (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006) or energy security (Talus, 2008). I am not going to propose my own definition as this will only contribute to problems these concepts are facing. The paper uses definition of small states developed by Panke (2010) who divides EU member states on big and small ones depending on their political power operationalized as a number of votes in the Council of the EU. This creates 19 small (number of votes below average 12,78 votes) and 7 big

member states (above 12,78 votes in the Council). Such definition is advantageous since it is a) combining other attributes used for defining small member states, namely physical size and their position within the EU as the number of votes was decided during intergovernmental conferences; b) is simple and we can easily find out which member state belongs to which group, without the need to argue about the boundaries as is the case with definitions using absolute number of votes (for example Mattila, 2004); c) it can be used for previous, but also future compositions of the Council.

Energy security is a complex concept that includes "technical, economic, social, environmental and geopolitical issues in close interaction" (Escribano and García-Verdugo, 2012, p. 27). Moreover, it differs among countries and in time, struggles with the effort of scholars to provide concise, but specific enough definition, consists of internal and external dimension and scholars are not united in what exactly it should encompass (Hedenus et al., 2010; Shaffer, 2009; Talus, 2008). Therefore, similarly to the discussion on small members, also discourse on energy security is on the one side very dynamic, on the other it lack cumulative insights. For these reasons this paper utilizes definition by Pointvogl, who claims that energy security means "uninterrupted, continuous and sufficient availability of all forms of energy a given entity requires" (Pointvogl, 2009, p. 5705 – 5706).

The analytical approach utilized by this paper claims that the support and opposition of small EU member states towards integration in energy security within the Union depends on their ability to deal with three energy security challenges. The first, external challenge concerns the ability of small countries to successfully negotiate with their energy suppliers, especially Russia that is the main external supplier of energy to the EU. Difficulties in negotiations with Russia is well documented (Umbach, 2011; Wood, 2011) and I claim that these are even more relevant for the small member states that lack negotiation potential of bigger members. Moreover, Russia prefers bilateral agreements with the biggest importers (Bohzilova and Hashimoto, 2010) what further worsen the position of small members. These find themselves in disadvantageous position also vis-à-vis big EU countries as they are having smaller amount of votes in the Council and smaller administrations that support their activities (intra-EU challenge). All in all, it is claimed that the big member states dominate EU decision-making process (Meerts, 1997) and can go even beyond this formal process (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006). However, small EU members are able to 'punch above their weight' (Björkdahl, 2008), if they engage different strategies to increase their power (Jakobsen, 2009; Nasra, 2011; Panke, 2011). The last, business challenge, cover the capacity of small EU countries to successfully deal with energy

companies operating on their territory. These have crucial role in ensuring energy security (Stoddard, 2012). European energy market is dominated by main energy companies from big member states (Ipek and Williams, 2010) and these do not always play fair (Nechvátal et al., 2012). The small members could therefore encounter difficulties when trying to persuade these companies about the need to cooperate on energy security issues. I claim that those small EU member countries that are able to deal with these three challenges will oppose efforts to integrate in energy security area, as they will see no reason why should they get rid of their domestic competences. On the other hand those small members unable to deal with these challenges will support transfer of competences to the EU level that has better ability to solve energy security issues.

The data used in this paper stem from semi-structured interviews conducted in Vienna from November 2012 to January 2013. Altogether 15 interviews were conducted with senior officials from federal level state administration (Federal Ministry of Economy, Family and Youth; Federal Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs; Federal Chancellery of Austria), energy regulator (E-Control Austria) as well as with experts from NGO and different think-tanks. Important for the research was to include respondents from all the important departments of states administration bodies, as their views on energy security diverge. Regulator has a different perspective than the ministry of economy, while both have more pro-market position compared to respondents from ministry of foreign affairs. Average duration of an interview was about 40 minutes. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and if possible recorded and transcribed. However, most of the respondents, especially from the state administration, did not agreed on recording, in those cases notes were taken. The analysis below is based on qualitative analysis of these transcripts and notes.

Austrian Energy Security Challenges and Preferences

This section of the paper first analyses three energy security challenges of Austria and then compares the findings with energy preferences Austria pursues at the EU level. Results of the analysis shows that Austria is capable to deal with external energy security challenge, as it assumes pragmatic approach to its main energy suppliers and therefore has with them very good relations on political level. Within the EU Austria behaves as any other member state, following its national goals without much considering positions of other countries. It has relatively good cooperation with Germany, although it is not of a permanent nature. In business area has the federal, but also local governments very good relations with main energy compa-

nies and their relations are mutually beneficial. While the government backs-up OMV's activities at the international and EU level, the company successfully ensures energy security.

External Challenge

The first challenge concerns relations between Austria and its main energy suppliers. These are Russia that provides most of natural gas (around 50% of total consumption) and Kazakhstan, that is the main supplier of oil (about 37% of total consumption). In general, we can argue that Austria has very good relations with both of them and there are basically no issues that complicate mutual relations. Austria is considering relations with these countries in rather pragmatic terms and see it from business perspective what is very well received by the partners.

Relations between Austria and Russia can be considered good according to the interviewees; one of the respondents identified them even as "frictionless" (Interview6). There are not unsolved issues between the two countries on the official level and there is also a whole range of unofficial contacts. Austria has a long tradition with a gas supplies from Russia, in fact, Austrians "have opened the Russian gas for Europe" several decades ago (Interview6). Austria consider Russia to be reliable partner and the 2009 gas crisis did not changed this. As one expert claimed, "Russians have been reliable partners... in the last 50 years" (Interview12), also senior officials at ministry of economy shared such position. Another respondent claimed that they "have [had] good business connections with Russia for more than 40 years and... the only incident we had with Russia [was] in 2009". In spite of this "Russians are still our main supplier" (Interview4).

The gas crisis in January 2009 was handled relatively very well" (Interview11). Although there were some measures needed (there was an agreement with the biggest gas users to limit their consumption), the country was influenced only to a limited scope. As expressed by an official at the ministry of economy, during the crisis "Gazprom found way how to supply Austria" (Interview10). From Austrian point of view, the problem was not Russia, but Russian-Ukrainian relations, some of the respondents directly blamed Ukraine with its "special" political situation for the crisis. The country was able to successfully deal with the crisis also because after similar crisis in 2006 they "did a lot of things to prepare itself for similar situation in the future" (Interview2). The crisis is one of the reasons why Austria supports diversification and building of new gas pipelines. Although at the governmental level Nabucco "is not only a new source of gas, it is also new way of transport and it would decrease the dependency on Russian gas" (Interview4), critical expert claimed

that the project "is absolutely dead" (Interview12). Also South Stream is supported by the government, although they still do not know for sure whether at least one of the branches of the pipeline will end in Baumgarten, Austrian gas hub. However, as explained by an official at the federal chancellery, "we have political agreement with Russians that if South stream should go to Austria that we will support everything" (Interview4). Moreover, Austria cooperates with Russia in developing of storage facilities; there are several projects in this area.

Since Austria is dependent on energy imports, its principal interests include stable supplies from abroad. Therefore Austrians follow "political dialogue with Russia" (Interview11) as Russia is extremely important partner for them. Compared to the new member states Austria does "not have such kind of sensitivities" (Interview6) nor "ideological problems with Russians because we are on the other side of the iron curtain" (Interview4). Therefore their approach is rather pragmatic. As sarcastically observed by an energy expert, the key of successful relations with Russia is that "we drink with everyone until we get what we want. That is what we do since '45. This is a founding myth of the country". And Austrian representatives "are pretty good at that" (Interview12).

One issue that Austrian representatives are not happy about in connection to Russia are the prices of gas. On the one hand, long-term contract with Gazprom means according to the interviewees energy security, on the other prices of such gas are higher compared to the spot market prices, since the long-term contracts are connected to oil prices. Austrian officials understand such pragmatic Russian approach, since "energy is an asset and they are trying to sell it as expensive as possible" (Interview6). However, this issue has to be addressed in the future since there will be probably increased demand for natural gas in the medium-term. In the process of switching to full reliance on renewables there will be need for more gas as this is "bridging energy" since it produces only limited amount of CO₂. So this means on the one hand that there will be maybe a need for both new pipelines, Nabucco and South Stream, that are considered to be in direct competition right now, on the other hand this will put pressure also on the prices of gas.

Oil is imported from Kazakhstan, with which have Austrian also very good and rather pragmatic relations. As explained by one interviewee, it is "a tricky relationship with a country, which is run by a dictator. However, the business is doing well" (Interview4). He added, that "as long as the EU is not having sanctions against Kazakhstan we deal with them like any other country which is not run by perfect democracy" (ibid.). However, also in such case there is a way how to keep good relationship and not to impose sanctions at once.

As explained by his colleague, "maybe we will work that the sanctions will not be implemented immediately, we will have some delay. We will find way around the sanctions, some solutions. This is the game, this is the EU, you are a part of it" (Interview5).

Intra-EU Challenge

Austria is having more or less very good relations with other EU member states, although Germany is for them the most important partner. Although it sometimes follows other big member states, it behaves in a very similar manner, pushing through its own interest without considering the interest of other member states and the Union as a whole. Austrian officials utilized lesson from liberalization of telecommunications during negotiations of energy liberalization packages. They were quite active in this process, although they were not among leaders of the group that proposed its own type of unbundling. Complexity of the decision-making process and difficulty to find agreement among all member states cause that "you can work only on small steps, on the smallest common denominator" (Interview2).

Respondents understand that the decision-making process is based more on individual needs of member states than on an effort for common approach. As explained by an expert, "I am pretty sure that Austrian, whenever they can, as the other member state, are going to look to their own advantages" (Interview12). Such approach was chosen also by Germans who taped "directly to Russian market... and they would happily sell the gas then to you. Which is not very European thinking, it is rather business or national thinking" (ibid.). However, something very similar was done also by Austrians and their energy business. Nevertheless, there is cooperation between Austria and other countries, especially those who also participate on Nabucco project, but also Germany. The cooperation, but also interconnections are very important, because "a small country cannot really succeed with standing-alone strategy" (Interview2).

Some of the respondents claimed that there are no stable partners and cooperation in energy is based on ad-hoc basis, since "every country is so different, especially in energy questions" (Interview5). However, Germans are consulted usually as the first one among the member states during the discussions "out of convenience", although language does not play significant role according to officials from ministry of economy. On the other hand respondent at the federal chancellery admitted that language can also be one of the factors for close cooperation. Other respondents stressed the cooperation with Germany, some others mentioned Austrian support with electricity supply for Germany in winter times. In such cases, Austrian companies turn

on thermal power plants that have a back-up function and supply Germany that is lacking electricity due to phasing-out of nuclear power plants. On the other hand, as observed by an official at the federal chancellery, "if France and UK and Germany decide on something, we usually follow it" (Interview4).

During the energy liberalization process Austrian officials utilized their experience from process of liberalization of telecommunications at the EU level that took place previously. So they engaged in kind of "learning process" that resulted into more effective development of positions (Interview7). When they started negotiations in energy they already know what are the position of other countries towards liberalization and what are their boundaries. This has eased the process of position formulation and creation of liked-minded group.

Business Challenge

In general, it can be claimed that Austria has very good relationship with the main energy companies, both on the federal level as well as level of individual states. There is institutionalized cooperation between the government and energy companies organized within interest organizations like Österreichs energie or Fachverband für mineralölindustrie. At the sub-national level "the relationship between the states' governments and those local energy providers are very close, and there is sometimes much bigger ownership of the Land than the federal state's ownership in the OMV" (Interview12). In spite of such good relations, "it is difficult to rise prices in the period before elections on federal or state level" (Interview11).

Although the federal government has only minority share in OMV, the main energy firm, relations are mutually beneficial, as the government support the company at the international and EU level, as was the case of the third liberalization package, while OMV is effectively negotiating with their suppliers and ensuring energy security for Austria. Moreover, OMV has shares in companies in several member states (Interview6) and the federal government "is positive about the OMV acquiring as many other, Hungarian or whatever, oil companies" (Interview12).

Austrian government does not have that much influence on the decisions taken by OMV as it had previously. However, "the state knowing that this is one of the biggest companies in the country it of course tries to help where it can to the OMV". Moreover, it is "very clear" that these two coordinate and the government "does not go against the business" in general (Interview12). For example, concerning the international level, OMV is the main stakeholder in Nabucco project and the government promotes this project and "as long as OMV is not making different business position that

it is too expensive or not worthwhile to do it, we support it" (Interview4). On the other hand, it enjoys "very strong position of the OMV as a player in the international gas market" (Interview12). The company "has a lot of mutual projects with the Russian" and there "is a kind of interdependence" between these two (ibid.). Energy companies in general companies "have routine and they are used to negotiate" (Interview11). More specifically, "OMV has a long tradition to buy gas from Russia and to negotiate the contracts" (Interview11).

At the EU level Austria often supports those proposals that go in line with the interests of their main energy companies. So for example it partly supports creation of external energy policy because they are "having this big player, OMV, of course. That is quite clear" (Interview12). On the other hand, full ownership unbundling "is a bad thing and there should be other opinions" (Interview2) and it "was somehow against the way of Austrian thinking in energy business", with the main argument that it would be "very costly for Austria and Austrian companies like Verbunt to make the full unbundling" (Interview4). OMV was against ownership unbundling and Austrian government supported their arguments and joined the "group of eight". As energy expert claimed, there were "no doubts" about the influence of OMV in this process because they wanted to protect their assets. In his words, "once you have your own grid you do not want to open it for anyone else" (Interview12).

Austrian preferences at the EU level

In general, Austria is not very active member state within the EU decision-making process and wants to "strike a balance" between national and EU level. This is also true for energy area and Austrian representatives sometimes assume rather reactive position. As explained by an interviewee, "there is something which I would call Austrian soul. It is working now, it is going to work tomorrow. And it is not very proactive" (Interview12). For example in area of renewable energy sources (RES) they claim that Austria is well ahead of other countries and therefore does not need to be further active and it is enough until also the rest of the countries fulfil their duties. Their goal for RES until 2020 is 34% and "Austria has a very good position to reach the goal" (Interview11).

In spite of this fact are RES together with nuclear the two most visible preferences that Austria pursues at the EU level. Austria was successful at the EU level also in area of energy efficiency but this issue is not that prominent now (Interview8). In the past Austria actively supported development of energy internal market, however, it reached its boundaries in terms of liberalization although it "has been seen as a big success so far" (Interview3) and "at the moment, it is busi-

ness-as-usual" (Interview11). Austria is supporting development of RES at the EU level and activities of the Commission in this area. They see the need for the development of the electricity grid at the EU level, since "networks [are not build] as fast as RES" (Interview9) and current grid is "is totally insufficient" (Interview12). Feed-in tariffs is a sensitive question as they increase the price of electricity and has to be set very carefully, not as in German case (Interview8). Also Austrians have to make their "homework" and upgrade their grid (Interview6) in order to be prepared for switching.

Another preference pursued at the EU level, however, also not very active, is opposition towards nuclear energy. As explained by a respondent, "we have outspoken anti-nuclear policy in Brussels, which is usually 26 against one" (Interview4). This issue has a very broad support from the public and according to one official, "you can win elections on anti-nuclear" attitudes (Interview6). The domestic motto is "thou shall not have nuclear" (Interview8) and Austrian pursue this topic at the EU level, but also at the bilateral level with their neighbours. Nuclear is a reason why Austria is against harmonization of energy mix, although "national control of the energy mix was never a big topic here because that was clear for the Austrians that this is a condition, absolute condition" (Interview12). Sovereignty in energy mix means for Austria that they do not want that other countries could dictate them whether they have to or not have to use nuclear energy. Moreover, they want other countries to join Germany and phase-out their nuclear facilities (Interview6). Interestingly, permanent representation in Brussels is not supposed to develop Austrian positions, and present only official positions developed in Vienna, but what "is always safe to say is [anti] nuclear" (Interview9).

Conclusion

The paper presented results of research on small member states and their preferences towards integration in energy security area. The conclusions show that for Austria energy security is not a topic at the EU level as they are rather reactive at the EU level and the only preferences they pursue are connected to renewables and nuclear energy. Although these have also security dimension, this is not their main focus. From Austrian point of view the level of current energy security is rather satisfactory and they are taking part in project that will further increase their security. However, they see it more as a domestic 'homework' and a "big challenge now and for the next years to build the infrastructure" (Interview3).

Proposed theoretical framework is able to shed some light on this Austrian stance. The country is able

to cope to rather significant level with the three challenges and therefore see no reason why should transfer these issues at the EU level. It has a long history of successful political and economic relations with Russia and there have never been difficulties with gas supplies. Even the 2009 gas crisis is perceived as a Ukrainian fault and Austria did not experienced bigger problems during this period. The relationship is rather pragmatic and in the same way is approached also Kazakhstan that is the main oil supplier. Austria utilizes close relations with Germany that are mutually beneficial, however, Austria sometimes follows decisions of big member states at the EU level. This cannot be evaluated as inability of Austria to deal with intra-EU challenge as is several times successfully persuaded their goals, as was for example the situation with energy efficiency. OMV has a specific place in Austria and although the government and the company are not anymore connected as close as they used to be, the relations are at a very high level and both partners supporting efforts of the other.

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