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Pierre Bocquillon,
Cambridge University,
pmvb2@cam.ac.uk / pierre.bocquillon@gmail.com

Tomas Maltby,
King's College London,
tomas.maltby@kcl.ac.uk / tmaltby@gmail.com

The more the merrier? Assessing the impact of enlargement on EU performance in energy and climate change policies

ABSTRACT This article examines the impact of enlargement on European Union (EU) performance in energy and climate change policies. It reflects on the impact of enlargement on EU policy-making (process driven performance) focusing on institutional change, agenda-setting and negotiation dynamics. It also assesses how enlargement has affected policy outcomes (outcome-driven performance), by looking at policy objectives and their implementation. The empirical analysis is based on a qualitative, comparative case study analysis of EU climate change and energy security policies. We argue that, although recent enlargements have not led to institutional deadlock or a stable Eastern coalition, they have contributed to bringing some issues back to the top of the European agenda – such as the security of gas supplies – as well as to fuel old debates – especially the issue of burden sharing in climate change negotiations. In terms of outcome, enlargement has not prevented the adoption of relatively ambitious climate legislation, although Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) have been able to obtain significant concessions. Besides, CEECs have made a positive, although limited, contribution to improving EU security. However, their impact may further increase as the paper points to their renewed assertiveness in both energy security and climate policy in recent years.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe; climate change; energy; enlargement; European Union; policy performance.

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1. Introduction

More than a decade has passed since the 2004 enlargement, when eight Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) joined the European Union (EU),¹ followed by Bulgaria and Romania three years later, and Croatia in 2013. The Eastern enlargement, arguably one of the most important challenges faced by the EU in the last decade, coincided with rapid progress in energy and climate policy integration at the European level. The informal Hampton Court European summit of October 2005 is often credited for marking the beginning of a political process which led to the agreement on the Climate and Energy Package (CEP) in December 2008 as well as the adoption of the third legislative package on the Internal Energy Market (IEM) in June 2009 (Buchan 2009). The January 2009 gas ‘crisis’ between Ukraine and Russia, which led to severe supply disruptions across Europe, particularly amongst newer member states (NMS), has also spurred the adoption of a series of new measures to improve energy security and reinforce crisis response mechanisms (McGowan 2011; Maltby 2013).

The rapid development of EU energy legislation may appear surprising when contrasted with the gloomy expectations of some analysts regarding the impact of the Eastern enlargement on the European policy-making process, where decision-making paralysis or substantial slowdown was anticipated (Golub 1999: 744).² Not only has the European decision-making process not been blocked, but several significant pieces of legislation have also been adopted that reinforce the EU’s influence and expand the scope for cooperation at the European level. The adoption in 2008 of the Climate and Energy Package, which introduces binding renewable energy targets and ambitious climate objectives for member states, is a telling example.

The Eastern enlargement can also be considered a favourable factor for the development of a European energy policy, especially with regard to security of supplies. Energy is a key issue for CEECs who are generally strongly in favour of a common European approach. Indeed, certain CEECs critically depend on Russia for their energy supply – especially in the gas sector. Their energy infrastructures inherited from the Communist era tie them to Russia, which still provides a large share of their oil and gas consumption and has often used energy as a political lever (Bouzarovski 2010; Maltby 2015). Therefore, they have been strong supporters of common policies to deal with energy security and have repeatedly called for an EU that ‘speaks with one voice’ on energy issues. The accession of ten (now eleven) relatively highly dependent and vulnerable member states may well have positively contributed to the development of EU energy policies.

Although the impact of the Eastern enlargement on EU policy-making has received considerable attention in the academic literature on European institutions and policies, past the immediate post-accession period, interest for the longer-term impact of enlargement has faded. The effect of enlargement on environmental policy has been extensively discussed, especially as many analysts expected that the accession of ten less wealthy member states with a mixed environmental record and little interest for environmental protection would

¹ Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

² Though scholars such as Zielonka (2004) thought such concerns had been overplayed.

affect EU policies negatively.³ As for the inter-related sectors of energy and climate change, they have remained relatively neglected. Until recently, EU energy policy was an understudied field. In recent years, the role of CEECs in climate policy has received more attention due to the increasingly sensitive character that this issue has acquired for these member states (Buchan 2010; Spencer and Fazekas 2012; Braun 2014). Similarly, the role of specific NMS in EU energy security policies has also been the object of a couple of recent empirical studies (Maltby 2015; Misik 2010; 2015). However, these contributions do not address directly the impact of NMS on EU performance in the policy area and specify the mechanisms through which enlargement has affected policy-making.

The paper argues that the accession of CEECs has not fundamentally affected the EU's decision-making process but has significantly impacted on its agenda and the substance of its policies. Enlargement has contributed to bringing energy security to the top of the European agenda, and made the issue of burden sharing in climate policy more salient. However, we argue that energy and climate negotiations have not been characterised by a straightforward East-West cleavage. This is because CEECs do not form a single unified bloc and also because their demands have been shaped by the institutional and discursive environment at the European level. However, in recent years we observe an increasing assertiveness from CEECs in both energy security and climate change policies, linked to external events such as the 2009 gas 'crisis' and Ukrainian upheavals on the one hand, and to the economic crisis and the failure of the 2009 Copenhagen climate change conference on the other.

Taking stock of the existing literature, the first section proposes a framework to assess the impact of the Eastern enlargement on EU sectoral policy-making and outlines the conceptions of process and outcome performance applied in this research. This framework is then applied to the two case studies, energy security and climate change. Our analysis is based on process tracing, drawing on documents, press releases and elite interviews with national and European expert and bureaucrats, conducted during the period 2010-2013.

³ For an extensive review of the existing literature on enlargement and the environment, pre- and post-enlargement, see Skjaerseth and Wettstad (2007: 266-8) and Burns et al. (2012: 55-8).