Implementing the European Green Deal during the Evolving Energy Crisis

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Introduction

At first sight, two features stand out in the development of EU climate policy in 2021. First, the implementation of the European Green Deal, launched in 2019 (Eckert, 2021), advanced significantly through the adoption of the European Climate Law (Regulation 2021/1119) in June and the publication of the Commission’s ‘Fit for 55’ package of implementing legislation in July 2021 (European Commission, 2021c). Second, implementation of the Green Deal proceeded at a time of enduring and intensifying crises. Above the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, this included an energy crisis that unfolded in the course of 2021 and escalated dramatically following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. How has the implementation of the Green Deal fared under these conditions? Has the EU moved closer to, or further away from, a truly effective climate policy in line with the 2015 Paris Agreement?

Existing literature does not provide clear-cut expectations. EU climate policy has long followed a pattern of ‘internationally leading but insufficient’, in the sense that it has been relatively ambitious by international comparison but has remained insufficient in view of the Paris Agreement’s goal of limiting the rise of global average temperature to well below 2°C or even 1.5°C from pre-industrial levels (Gheuens and Oberthür, 2021; Oberthür and Dupont, 2021; cf. UNEP, 2019). Sequential and overlapping crises have interacted with this pattern in various ways (von Homeyer et al., 2021). On the one hand, the global economic and financial crisis of 2008/2009 shifted the debate away from climate ambition towards other priorities and cost-efficiency, although the broad trajectory of EU climate policy continued (Gravey and Jordan, 2021, p. 347; Slominski, 2016). On the other hand, the political response to the COVID-19 crisis has been found to have the potential to accelerate the EU’s climate and energy transition (Dupont et al., 2020; Eckert, 2021). In both instances, the crises interacted with established political conflict lines on EU climate policy, prominently the one between more progressive Western and Northern and more sceptical Eastern EU Member States, led by Poland (Bocquillon and Maltby, 2017; Dupont et al., 2020; Eckert, 2021; Skjærseth, 2021).

Against this backdrop, in investigating the development of EU climate policy under evolving crisis conditions in 2021 and early 2022, we advance two arguments. First, the implementation of the European Green Deal has progressed despite some headwinds, while EU climate policy has continued to fall short of what would be required in view of the 2/1.5°C goal of the Paris Agreement. Second, the still evolving energy crisis, strongly...
amplified by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, has the potential to significantly weaken the historically established East–West conflict line in EU climate policy.

We pursue our analysis in three steps. In the next section, we first retrace and assess the major developments of EU climate policy in 2021, especially the adoption of the European Climate Law and the launch of the Fit for 55 Package. Subsequently, we investigate the energy crisis evolving in 2021 and further escalating in early 2022 and the EU’s political response to it, focusing especially on the Fit for 55 proposals. Finally, we discuss the implications of both developments and their interaction, including for important aspects of underlying EU climate politics, before drawing our conclusions.

I. EU Climate Policy in 2021

As already mentioned, two elements of the European Green Deal stand out for EU climate policy development in 2021. First, the European Climate Law – proposed in early 2020 – was adopted in June 2021. Importantly, the Climate Law legally enshrined the Green Deal’s medium and long-term goals for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. It upgraded the EU’s original target of reducing GHG emissions by ‘at least’ 40 per cent by 2030 from 1990 levels to ‘at least’ 55 per cent, and it legally enshrined the target of achieving climate neutrality by 2050, already agreed politically by the European Council in late 2019. The Climate Law also created a framework for the further development of future EU climate policy, not least by foreseeing a 2040 GHG emission reduction target along with an overall indicative emission budget for 2030–50 by 2024, by establishing a European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change, and by mandating a consistency review of other EU legislation with the 2030 and 2050 climate targets (Regulation 2021/1119, Articles 3, 4, 6 and 12).

Soon after, 2021 saw the launch of the Fit for 55 Package of legislative proposals to implement the new 55 per cent emission reduction target for 2030. The European Commission tabled the core of the package, consisting of 15 legislative proposals, in July 2021. Further legislative proposals complementing the July package were published in December 2021. The Commission proposed to tighten the cornerstones of existing EU climate legislation, including the Emissions Trading System (ETS) Directive, covering power plants and large industrial emitters as well as domestic aviation; the Effort Sharing Regulation, setting national emission reduction targets for Member States up to 2030 in non-ETS sectors (buildings, transport, agriculture); the Regulation establishing CO₂ emission standards for cars and vans; the Renewable Energy Directive; the Energy Efficiency Directive; and the Regulation on Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) which sets a target of no net emissions from the sector; as well as the Environmental Performance of Buildings Directive and the rules governing the gas market to integrate (green) hydrogen (the last two tabled in December 2021).

In addition, the Commission proposed several new elements. These included a new, second ETS for buildings and transport and an associated Social Climate Fund that would use a significant part of the income generated by the new ETS to cushion the social impacts on particularly vulnerable segments of society. A newly proposed Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) would serve to tax the carbon-content of imports of high-emission products (such as steel, aluminium, cement and electricity), thereby enabling the phase-out of free allocation of emission allowances to energy-intensive
industry under the EU ETS. Furthermore, a revision of minimum energy tax rates to better reflect climate considerations also forms part of the Fit for 55 Package, along with proposals for a stepwise scaling up of the use of green fuel in aviation and maritime transport. Finally, the Commission proposed a Regulation addressing methane emissions from the energy sector in December 2021.

Overall, the European Climate Law and the Fit for 55 Package entail a significant upgrade of the EU’s climate policy framework. Nevertheless, this upgrade remains insufficient compared to the scale of the climate challenge. To start with, the 55 per cent emission reduction target for 2030, while constituting a significant strengthening of the prior 40 per cent target, still falls short of the ambition required for realizing the EU’s fair share of implementing the Paris Agreement’s 2/1.5°C temperature goal. It is also weakened by several flexibilities, including offsetting 2.2 percentage points through LULUCF credits (see for example Gheuens and Oberthür, 2021).

The revisions of the ETS Directive and the Effort Sharing Regulation primarily serve to concretely implement the overall emission target and distribute it across the EU-wide ETS and the non-ETS sectors (by defining member state-specific emission targets covering these sectors). The Commission has furthermore proposed to include the maritime transport sector in the ETS. The proposed revisions of the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Directives would strengthen the ambition in these areas in line with the overall emission target. Specifically, they envisage an upgrade of the 2030 share of renewables in final energy consumption from 32 to 40 per cent and of energy efficiency improvements from 32.5 to 36 (final energy consumption) and 39 per cent (primary energy consumption). The proposed second ETS for transport and buildings aims to establish a carbon price in these sectors, thereby incentivizing emission reductions without yet establishing a fixed emission limit.

Several elements of the Fit for 55 Package are designed to become fully effective and shape EU climate policy after 2030. The proposed average emission reduction of new cars and vans of 55 per cent by 2030 will have its main impact only later, as will the proposed prescription of zero emission cars by 2035 (resulting in a de facto ban of the internal combustion engine). Similarly, the phase-out of the free allocation of emission allowances to energy-intensive industries resulting from the CBAM will only be completed in the 2030s, and the share of green fuels in aviation and maritime transport as well as of (green) hydrogen will become significant mainly post-2030. The same goes for the proposed prescription of the stepwise improvements of the energy efficiency of buildings, the impact of which will only unfold over a longer period. Hence, the Fit for 55 Package shapes the EU’s emission trajectory also post 2030 and towards the 2050 climate-neutrality target.

Beyond the ambition and direct mitigation impact, the European Climate Law and the Fit for 55 Package will also upgrade the EU’s climate policy framework in at least two other respects (thereby continuing past trends, see Oberthür and von Homeyer, 2022). First, they further expand the scope of EU climate policy and advance the integration of additional sectors. This effect is not least a result of the CBAM which employs trade policy for climate policy objectives, the integration of maritime transport in the ETS together with the scaling up of green fuels for the sector, the shifting emphasis of gas market regulation towards the integration of (green) hydrogen, and the measures for reducing methane emissions in the energy sector. In general, the European Climate Law foresees
climate-plaiting of other sectoral policies. These elements signal a continuation and intensification of the expansion of climate policy to relevant sectors and policies.

Second, the implementation of the Green Deal in 2021 is also set to further ‘thicken’ the EU climate policy mix. Additional policy instruments have been proposed for specific sectors already partly covered by existing climate policy, to address remaining challenges and exploit existing potentials. Examples include the proposed establishment of a second ETS for transport and buildings (complementing the Environmental Performance of Buildings Directive and CO₂ emission standards for new cars and vans that are also strengthened); the proposed green fuel mandate for aviation (otherwise partly covered by the ETS), and the planned Social Climate Fund as a partial reimbursement mechanism in the field of social policy complementing the existing Just Transition Mechanism and Fund. If confirmed in the ongoing legislative process, this thickening can be expected to further enhance the effectiveness of the EU’s climate policy framework (see also Oberthür and von Homeyer, 2022).

The advances in the implementation of the Green Deal also served as the main contribution by the EU to international climate policy. In 2021, the EU’s external climate policy centred around the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Glasgow. Having submitted an updated ‘Nationally Determined Contribution’ (NDC) with its 55 per cent emission reduction target for 2030 in December 2020, the EU’s position in the international negotiations was further bolstered by the adoption of the European Climate Law, including the 2050 climate neutrality target, and the tabling of the Fit for 55 Package. Thereby, the EU remained internationally leading in advancing climate policy among the major economies and called on other parties to establish mid-century climate neutrality targets as well. By mid-2022, 63 countries (excluding the EU) had adopted in law (15 countries), in policy documents (29 countries) or pledged/declared (18 countries) 2050 climate neutrality targets (Turkey: 2053), with another eight countries having committed to a 2060 target, while such targets are still being debated in 60 countries (own calculation based on: Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit, 2022).

Internal political divisions among Member States, often reflecting structural interests rooted in enduring national socio-economic conditions (Bailer et al., 2015), remained virulent during discussions in the EU Council and the European Parliament on the Climate Law and the Fit for 55 Package. Especially three lines of conflict stood out: perhaps most importantly, the East–West divide spearheaded by Poland once again came to the forefront. Poland has a long history of opposition to ambitious EU climate policy mainly reflecting its still heavy reliance on domestically available coal which has geopolitical (energy supply security), economic (cost of energy transition) and political (weak environmental movement) roots (Bocquillon and Maltby, 2017; IEA, 2022; Szulecki et al., 2016). In line with its reluctance to subscribe to the 2050 climate neutrality target, Poland, supported by Hungary, had delayed agreement on the upgraded 2030 target of 55 per cent for several months until December 2020 as the target had become entangled in the conflict with the EU over democratic backsliding (Eckert, 2021; Siddi, 2021).

A second divide concerns the nexus between the energy transition and social justice – especially energy and mobility poverty but also socio-economic inequality more generally (‘just transition’). Poland and other less wealthy Eastern and Southern Member States, but also France with its experience of ‘yellow-vest’ protests sparked by fuel tax
increases (Martin and Islar, 2021), have cautioned against the economic impact of extending emissions trading to transport and buildings on lower income households (Euractiv, 2022i) – a position shared by important factions of the European Parliament (Euractiv, 2022a). Similarly, these countries have strongly supported the proposed Social Climate Fund, with Poland not only calling for a larger budget but also for adopting the fund independent of the extension of emissions trading (Euractiv, 2021b). By contrast, reflecting the position of Germany and others, the Council has called for a lower budget and no co-financing by Member States (Euractiv, 2022h). The majority position was apparently inspired by a mix of ‘frugal’ and distributive motivations, partly reflecting the fact that especially German (and Italian and Hungarian) lower- and middle-income households have been most strongly affected by the recent steep rise of energy prices (Steckel et al., 2022). Yet, the Social Climate Fund tends to benefit some countries which were less affected by the energy crisis (see European Parliament, 2022a).

Finally, a third conflict line results from the varying significance of extra-EU exports for the national economies of different Member States. Despite the proposed introduction of the CBAM to protect European industry from unfair international competition, Member States with high extra-EU exports, such as Germany, were reluctant to phase out free emission allowances, since the proposed CBAM would not compensate them for their higher production costs compared to competitors on international markets (Euractiv, 2022b).

As illustrated below, the evolving energy crisis heightened some of these underlying divisions and concerns, particularly those linked to energy prices.

II. The Evolving Energy Crisis of 2021/2022

On top of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, an energy crisis began to unfold in 2021. Initially fuelled mainly by the global economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, but also low gas supplies from Russia (and aggravated by previous gas market reforms that had resulted in a shift away from long-term gas contracts), European energy prices (particularly gas and electricity) increased dramatically, especially in the second half of 2021 (European Commission, 2021a). In autumn 2021, energy prices rose to the top of the EU agenda, with the European Council discussing the issue prominently both in October and December. At the October summit, Poland, supported by the Czech Republic and Hungary, seized on the energy crisis to call for a revision or postponement of all elements of the Fit for 55 Package that could increase energy prices, with ‘special emphasis’ on the ETS and the proposed revision of the energy taxation Directive (Euractiv, 2021c). On their part, Spain, France and others called for an immediate reform of the EU electricity market (that translated high gas prices into high electricity prices) (Euractiv, 2021a). However, the Commission instead emphasized the need for national measures in the short term. For the longer term, it argued for accelerating the implementation of the Green Deal stating that the ‘clean energy transition is the best insurance against price shocks like the one the EU is facing today’ (European Commission, 2021a, p. 20). The October European Council essentially endorsed these views.

In parallel to rising energy prices, concerns about energy supply security also grew slowly but steadily. As mentioned, politically motivated low supplies of Russian natural
gas were contributing to rising energy prices in Europe. But with tensions with Russia rising, they also increasingly raised questions relating to the very availability of sufficient supplies to satisfy demand. The EU has been particularly dependent on imports from Russia, especially of natural gas but also other fossil fuels. In 2021, the EU relied on Russia for about 40, 25 and 45 per cent of its gas, oil and coal consumption, respectively (Euractiv, 2022d). Most gas imports and a significant part of oil imports from Russia arrived via pipelines and could not be easily replaced (Sitter, 2022). The situation was aggravated by higher demand from other countries, including China and the US, in the wake of the economic recovery from COVID-19 (Gilbert et al., 2021). While it was originally believed that the main Russian aim was to exert pressure to secure German and EU approval of the North Stream 2 pipeline completed in 2021, the large military build-up at the border to Ukraine since March 2021 added a strong geopolitical dimension to Russia’s actions. In December 2021, the European Council (2021) responded with a stark warning to Russia that ‘[a]ny further military aggression against Ukraine will have massive consequences and severe cost in response, including restrictive measures coordinated with partners’.

The geopolitical risks of the EU’s energy dependence on Russia came fully to the fore in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Sitter, 2022). The invasion led to a further increase of energy prices (Steckel et al., 2022), reflecting growing expectations of a (partial) Western/EU embargo of Russian fossil fuel exports and the possibility of even lower Russian gas supply to the EU. In April and May 2022, the EU adopted first an embargo on Russian coal and subsequently also a partial oil embargo (for an overview of sanctions, see European Council, 2022). In parallel, Russia has further curtailed gas supplies to the EU.

In response, based on a Commission Communication endorsed by the March European Council, the Commission proposed the REPowerEU Plan in May 2022 (European Commission, 2022). The plan sets out measures to compensate for a gradual phase out of fossil fuel imports from Russia. The Commission proposed to ‘accelerate the clean energy transition’ and to ‘diversify energy sources’. Amending several Fit for 55 legislative proposals is at the heart of the planned acceleration. Perhaps most importantly, the Commission proposed to further increase the targets of the Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Directives from 9 to 13 and from 40 to 45 per cent, respectively, and to raise sub-targets for green hydrogen use. It also called for more than a doubling of photovoltaic power generation by 2025 and a near quadrupling until 2030, including a legally binding obligation to install solar power on rooftops of new buildings, simplified permitting and planning procedures for renewable energy and legal obligations to upgrade the energy performance of existing buildings. Finally, the REPowerEU plan envisages a more than 10-fold increase in the production of biomethane by 2030.

In addition, REPowerEU aims at a geographical diversification of energy supply, including increasing import of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from around the world. This requires the construction of new gas infrastructure, such as LNG terminals and pipelines, posing considerable risks of carbon lock-in within and beyond the EU (Bouckaert and Dupont, 2022; Conti and Kneebone, 2022) and, if not properly addressed, increased methane emissions associated with LNG (European Commission, 2022). Most of the estimated EUR 300 billion in additional investments required for REPowerEU is to be covered by existing funds, especially the Recovery and Resilience Facility originally created.
to mitigate the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis. However, EUR 20 billion is to be raised by auctioning of additional ETS emission allowances, which would allow for higher GHG emissions and, due to the political nature of the intervention, has been criticized for undermining trust in the EU’s carbon market (Euractiv, 2022e).

The intensified energy crisis since the Russian invasion has initially tended to politically favour an increase in ambition of the Fit for 55 proposals, despite the simultaneous presence of some countervailing forces. Indicating a potential weakening of the East-West divide, general support for the energy transition appeared to be stronger even among traditional sceptics, such as Poland and other Eastern Member States, which seemed to view the transition increasingly through a sympathetic energy security rather than sceptical climate policy lens (Euractiv, 2022d). However, this tendency was less visible concerning concrete proposals. While there seemed to be broad support in the European Parliament for the increased 45 per cent renewables target, there was still no clear majority support in the Council (Euractiv, 2022c). At the same time, especially emissions trading came under renewed attack, often reflecting the economic, social and political divisions among Member States mentioned above. In its June 2022 negotiating position the European Parliament called for a delayed, conditional and limited extension of emissions trading to non-commercial buildings and transport while also struggling to adopt a position on ETS reform and an earlier phase out of free emission allowances (Euractiv, 2022f; European Parliament, 2022b). Similarly, the Council’s negotiating position on emissions trading (Council of the European Union, 2022) tended to be less ambitious than the Commission’s proposals, albeit apparently with a stronger emphasis on industrial and competitiveness concerns than Parliament’s position.

Discussion and Conclusions

In 2021, and in early 2022, the implementation of the European Green Deal progressed considerably, especially through the adoption of the Climate Law and the tabling of the Fit for 55 proposals. At the same time, the Green Deal and its implementation remained insufficient. The 2030 goal to reduce GHG emissions by at least 55 per cent remained below the EU’s fair share of effort required to achieve the temperature goal of the Paris Agreement. Nevertheless, at the time of writing, the legislative process around the proposed Fit for 55 Package is still evolving and a final assessment can only be made once the outcome is known.

The energy price and security crisis has affected the process of agreeing on the Fit for 55 Package. However, there is still much uncertainty about future interactions. On the one hand, there is a risk that climate measures will be weakened in the short term as illustrated by renewed Polish calls to essentially pause the ETS (Financial Times, 2022a), German concerns about phasing out free emission allowances, and hesitation in Member States and the European Parliament to extend emissions trading to buildings and transport. Moreover, faced with the prospect of potential gas shortages caused by further Russian supply reductions, some Member States – for example Germany and the Netherlands – have increasingly relied on what has been declared a short-term return of coal fired power plants (Financial Times, 2022b). On the other hand, responding to the crisis by advancing the clean energy transition can synergize with the European Green Deal (Delbeke et al., 2022). The Commission has repeatedly advocated this approach, most importantly
with its REPowerEU plan calling for amendments and additions to the Fit for 55 Package that, if adopted, could lead to a notable acceleration of the energy transition.

Beyond increased uncertainty about the shape of the Fit for 55 Package in the short term, where does this leave the EU’s so far enduring ‘internationally leading but insufficient’ climate policy approach in the longer term? Our analysis suggests that the energy crisis has significantly increased risks and opportunities not only in the short but also in the longer term. Concerning longer-term risks, especially two issues stand out. First, as mentioned above, there is a risk of carbon lock-in resulting from new fossil fuel infrastructure investments envisaged especially in the REPowerEU plan. Even in the absence of future lock-in, these investments may risk competing with financing of energy efficiency and other measures and may eventually turn into stranded assets (Conti and Kneebone, 2022).

Second, hesitation among several Member States and the European Parliament to extend emissions trading to the buildings and transport sectors suggests that high energy prices, especially for lower-income households, may evolve into a growing challenge for EU climate policy (Delbeke et al., 2022; Steckel et al., 2022). The Commission’s impact assessments estimated that achieving the 55 per cent emission reduction target would on average not lead to higher energy or fuel costs as a share of disposable household incomes. However, especially lower-income groups (for mobility: lower-middle and middle-income groups) would be disproportionally burdened, in particular in less wealthy Member States (European Commission, 2021b). The extent to which the Social Climate Fund may compensate vulnerable households for this burden will eventually depend on the outcome of the negotiations between Parliament (supporting the Commission proposal) and Council (calling for significant cuts) (Euractiv, 2022h). However, the bigger risk for EU climate policy may arise from the social impacts of prolonged high energy prices induced by the energy crisis much beyond and irrespective of emissions trading (see Steckel et al., 2022). If these impacts remain unaddressed, EU climate policy, particularly emissions trading, may – although only a relatively small contributing factor – be at risk of significant political backlash ‘by association’ (see Martin and Islar, 2021).

Concerning longer-term opportunities, energy prices also stand out. Assuming that energy and in particular fossil fuel prices will stay high (Steckel et al., 2022), as especially Russian imports can only gradually be replaced, the economic rationale for using coal may further deteriorate. This would be particularly relevant for Poland (Kennedy, 2022; IEA, 2022). Similarly, high prices render natural gas significantly less attractive as a ‘transition fuel’ (Gray, 2022) in Germany and other Member States. The recent about-turn by the Commission in favour of a reform of the EU electricity market enabling a decoupling of fossil fuel and renewable energy prices would likely result in additional disincentives for continued reliance on coal and gas (Euractiv, 2022g).

A second potential opportunity concerns political acceptance among Member States. Besides the investment necessary for the energy transition, the other main reason why Eastern Member States, and in particular Poland, have a history of opposition to ambitious EU climate policies relates to their prioritizing energy security (Bocquillon and Maltby, 2017; Szulecki et al., 2016). However, following the Russian invasion, the EU has framed the energy transition strongly as a matter of energy security as reflected in the REPowerEU proposals (Delbeke et al., 2022). This new framing may lead to growing political acceptance of the energy transition in Poland and other Eastern Member

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States. Whether their recently somewhat less confrontational stance on the Fit for 55 Package mentioned above could be a first sign of such a development is, however, difficult to judge at this stage.

From a more historical (institutionalist) perspective (see for example Pierson, 1996; Dupont et al., 2020), an energy crisis driven closer alignment of the interests of key Member States could create more favourable conditions for taking advantage of the successive ‘windows of opportunity’ that have characterized recent EU climate policy. These were created by, first, the ‘Fridays for Future’ climate protests in 2019 and the subsequent adoption of the European Green Deal and, second, the COVID-19 crisis and the adoption of the relatively green EU Recovery and Resilience Facility and Multi-annual Financial Framework (Dupont et al., 2020). More specifically, the positions held by Poland and other Eastern Member States have consistently constrained the development of EU climate policy since the 2000s (see for example Bocquillon and Maltby, 2017; Skjærseth, 2021). A change in the way in which these Member States perceive their structural interests as outlined above – away from viewing the energy transition as a threat towards seeing it as a benefit for energy security and economic development – would relax these constraints, resulting in better conditions for taking advantage of the windows of opportunity. In the years ahead, with the continuing implementation of the Green Deal and the EU budget, including the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the windows of opportunity will remain at least partly open. This could pave the way for significantly higher EU climate ambition, especially if (1) the alignment of positions extends to further Member States such as Germany (see above) and (2) the EU resists political pressure to fundamentally weaken the ETS in the short term, which would significantly reduce incentives to phase out fossil fuels, in particular coal. 2021 and early 2022 have seen EU climate policy broadly remain on its ‘internationally leading but insufficient’ path. Yet, notwithstanding serious risks, the energy crisis may well open new potential for a further increase in EU climate ambition.

Acknowledgement

Ingmar von Homeyer and Sebastian Oberthür gratefully acknowledge support by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel’s strategic research programme ‘Evaluating Democratic Governance in Europe’.

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