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EU energy: the search for a safe and green future continues

The EU imports 50% of all its energy needs. With this level set to grow, the question of how the Union will satisfy its future energy demands was discussed at a hearing in the Parliament days before EU leaders debate the subject. The need for action is clear – an expert predicted that fossil fuel demand and CO2 emissions will rise by 50% in 25 years - jeopardising the stability of the earth's climate. Those present agreed that climate change and energy security are two sides of the same coin.

Energy as a “foreign policy instrument”

European oil and gas is mainly imported from Russia and the Middle East at present. The continuing violence in Iraq and the wider region and Russia's gas disputes with its neighbours in the Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia have raised questions about stability of supply.

The economic rise of China and India has also dramatically increased the world's demand and need for energy and with it, geo-political calculations. As Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, Chair of the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee remarked “energy is being used as a foreign policy instrument”.

Is the European Union vulnerable?

The consensus at the hearing was that the 27 Member States have to speak with one voice and develop a common policy towards energy.

Referring to current policy the Director of the International Energy Agency (IEA), Noé van Hulst, said that “speaking with one voice is nice but up to now has not been a reality”. He urged the EU to “have one message”. Mr Saryusz-Wolski reiterated this point saying that “national proposals are not sufficient”.

On behalf of the European Commission Eneko Landaburu warned of the “poverty of energy access” in parts of the world. This was due either to energy hunger or unavailability in parts of the world.

What can we do?

The first step may be to “turn down” or “switch off” appliances around the home. With the home accounting for so much energy consumption this could be one way of saving energy.

Applied to the wider economy a study by the Commission has concluded that the European Union's economy uses 20% more energy than it needs to sustain current levels of economic growth. Clearly there is room for improvement.

MEPs propose several options

MEPs advocated a number of solutions in the hearing.

Czech Social Democrat Libor Rouček, proposed the liberalisation of the EU market itself, promoting nuclear energy as a way of diversification and reduced dependency.

German Green Milan Horáček, and Portuguese socialist, Ana Maria Gomes, reminded the hearing of the trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in Russia and reiterated the need to connect energy and human rights issues.

Hannes Swoboda, Austrian Social democrat, raised the issues of what the EU is doing to support the "Nabucco project" (a proposed gas pipeline from Turkey, to Austria via Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary).

Janusz Onyszkiewicz (Polish Liberals and Democrats) raised the question of the potential of clean coal technologies in the future and a "gas OPEC" planned by Russia.

Noé van Hulst advocated a number of steps that could present an "alternative scenario". As well as energy efficiency the EU should consider a cleaner and safer supply (using renewable and nuclear energy where appropriate), diversification and the creation of emergency policies that could guarantee gas if the supply were to be cut off for a period.

Relations with Russia

With so much gas coming from Russia the EU's relations with Moscow are crucial. Some EU states like Slovakia, Finland, Bulgaria and Lithuania are heavily dependent on Russian gas. Vladimir Milov of Moscow's Institute of Energy Policy reminded the hearing of President Putin's remark that his government considers its energy giant Gazprom as the major tool on the foreign relations arena.

Zeyno Baran of Washington's Hudson Institute advocated Caspian, Mediterranean and Central Asian energy potential to be used by the EU.

Warning of "climate conflict"

Jennifer Morgan from an environmental think-tank in Berlin warned of the possibility of "climate conflict" and said that environmental stress and migratory threats were very real. On the importance of the issues Europe faces she warned that "climate change affects every EU policy, get it wrong and everything will go wrong for EU foreign policy".