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The Weaponization of Energy Resources: Fossil Fuels as Instruments of Geopolitical Leverage in the EU–Russia Context

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Abstract
This paper examines how energy functions as a strategic instrument of geopolitical coercion, focusing on Russia's prolonged weaponization of natural gas and the European Union's evolving response. Building on Soviet-era infrastructure, Moscow has employed price increases, supply cuts, and control of pipelines to pressure states. At the same time, the EU has countered with sanctions, diversification of suppliers, and accelerated investment in renewable energy. For more than fifty years, energy has served as leverage that blurs the boundary between economics and security, imposing heavy economic and political costs on both producers and consumers. Interdependence amplifies these vulnerabilities, allowing energy to operate as a "weapon" on both supply and demand sides. Although the EU plans to end Russian gas imports by 2027, Moscow's continuing circumvention efforts demonstrate that energy remains a critical tool of power and national security worldwide.

Keywords
Energy Resources; Weaponization; Russia; European Union; Geopolitics; Sanctions; Interdependence

INTRODUCTION

The growing aggressiveness of Russia's foreign policy underscores the issue of its use of energy resources as a strategic tool to advance its interests. While Russia is not the only state that resorts to energy-based influence, pressure, or blackmail, its current foreign energy policy represents one of the most striking examples of the weaponization of energy.

Since the 1990s, Russia has gained extensive experience in using energy resources as a lever of influence, initially targeting post-Soviet states, and later rapidly expanding its reach across Europe, facilitated by the energy infrastructure inherited from the Soviet era. These actions are primarily politically motivated, although Russia almost always seeks to justify them on economic grounds.

Russia has repeatedly used energy as a weapon against EU Member States, as well as against EU candidate countries such as Ukraine and Moldova. In the 2020s, tensions surrounding the import and export of energy resources have reached their highest levels. While each party to this confrontation acts in accordance with its national interests, the values characteristic of the parties, whether democratic or neo-authoritarian, also play a significant role.

In recent years, the extreme vulnerability of many European countries due to their dependence on Russian fossil fuels has become increasingly evident. At the same time,

awareness of the need to break these toxic energy supply chains has been growing. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a sharp intensification of the EU's efforts to achieve energy independence. The EU cannot ignore Russian actions such as targeted missile strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam, or the mining of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, acts that exemplify the aggressive use of energy and energy infrastructure as weapons. The destruction of such infrastructure constitutes a clear violation of state sovereignty and independence (Graf 2014).

The restructuring of the EU energy system and the diversification of supply sources represent a test of resilience for EU institutions, national governments of member and candidate states, as well as industry, businesses, and households. Efforts to dismantle long-established energy ties with Russia face significant challenges, including a lack of solidarity among EU Member States on many energy-related issues. Nevertheless, the process is underway, and the EU, guided by its strategic interests, has also begun to weaponize energy resources in response to Russia's destructive energy policy. These developments clearly require further academic analysis.

This research aims to examine the use of energy resources by Russia and the EU as instruments of geopolitical confrontation. The study focuses on three objectives:

1. Investigating how energy resources are converted into instruments of coercion by states and alliances.
2. Evaluating whether energy weaponization is exclusive to neo-authoritarian regimes or also practiced by democratic states and alliances.
3. Analyzing the reciprocal use of energy as a geopolitical tool by Russia and the EU.

The working hypotheses of this study include:

1. Energy resources serve as a form of weapon employed by states and alliances, generating significant political consequences.
2. The weaponization of energy resources is not exclusive to neo-authoritarian regimes; democratic states and their alliances also utilize such strategies.

The study applied a neo-institutionalist methodology to test this hypothesis. Using this framework, it analyzed the energy-based interdependence between the EU and Russia to examine how natural gas evolved into a geopolitical weapon, notably as their relationship shifted from interdependence to destructive dependence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the risks associated with using energy as a weapon in international relations and the numerous references to this issue in the literature on energy security, a systematic study of energy weaponization did not emerge until the 2010s. In 2010, the American think tank Council on Foreign Relations was among the first to call for an investigation into the relationship between energy supply (primarily fossil fuels) and political decision-making (Levi 2010).

M. C. LaBelle (2023) argues that energy has served as a weapon for more than half a century, beginning in 1973, when the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) used oil as a weapon against Western countries that supported Israel during the Yom Kippur

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War (p. 531). According to LaBelle, energy was once again weaponized in 2022 within the context of modern armed conflicts. LaBelle conceptualizes energy as 1) a tool used to exert pressure on sovereign states and 2) a multidimensional resource reflecting deeper connections within the political and economic structures of international relations. It is agreed with LaBelle's view that, both in the 1970s and in the 2020s, energy trade has been employed as a demonstration of power and as a means of undermining the sovereignty of independent states.

It is further argued that the weaponization of energy today extends beyond trade and is now manifested through a broad spectrum of actions and processes. These include the destruction of energy infrastructure, the forcible seizure of fossil fuel sources and other energy assets, sabotage of energy facilities, high-level political blackmail over energy supply, cyberattacks, and coercion targeting energy professionals. As a result, the range of both actions and inactions that may be classified as energy weaponization has expanded significantly in the contemporary geopolitical context.

Sonmez and Cobanoglu (2016) examined the use of energy resources as a foreign policy instrument, focusing specifically on Russia as a case study. Their research, conducted well before the current aggressive manifestations of Russian energy blackmail and terrorism, nevertheless demonstrated the centrality of the energy sector to Russian political power. Even a decade ago, it was evident that Russia's economic and geopolitical influence had grown, driven in part by the strategic use of energy resources, particularly amid rising oil prices. Accordingly, Russia began to pursue a more assertive foreign policy on a global scale. Sonmez and Cobanoglu's conclusion, that the Russian government extensively exploits energy resources as a foreign policy tool, remains both compelling and relevant today.

Research institutions and think tanks across Europe have devoted considerable attention to the issue of energy weaponization. This focus is understandable, given Europe's long-standing dependence on fossil fuel supplies from Russia. However, only after the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine did the diversification of both energy sources and supply routes significantly accelerate, serving as a strategic response to Russia's weaponization of energy. In this context, the research conducted by the Danish Institute for International Studies is particularly noteworthy. The findings of Slakaityte and Surwillo (2024) on Russia's use of natural gas blackmail offer especially valuable insights.

Boute (2022) examines the problem of energy weaponization through the lens of entrenched resource dependencies and the geopolitical leverage exercised by key actors in the international system. He emphasizes the urgent need for reforms in the field of energy security to prevent the use of energy resources as instruments of coercion. From his perspective as a legal scholar, reforms in international energy, trade, and investment law are essential to allow states to safeguard their energy security and counter energy weaponization in the evolving geopolitical landscape.

Long before the escalation of tensions in the 2020s, Smith Stegen (2011) posed the question of "whether Russia would use energy as a weapon to influence the policies of EU Member States and obtain political concessions," (p. 6505) even predicting potential models of Russian manipulation. It is argued that Stegen's formulation was influenced by Russia's already evident tendency to use energy as a weapon against Ukraine, as such practices have been documented since the first gas conflict in 1993 and in subsequent gas disputes.

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Lior (2021) demonstrates that fossil fuels have frequently served as tools of foreign policy throughout world history. Nonetheless, it remains insufficiently clear how energy functions as an instrument of international relations, influencing security and geopolitics. Lior emphasizes that future theoretical and empirical research on energy resources should focus on the diverse applications of various energy types as instruments of foreign policy by individual states, as well as their broader impact on global politics.

The review of literature on energy weaponization reveals: 1) a growing interest in the topic, reflecting the critical importance of energy resources to modern societies; 2) an expanding scope covering a wider variety of energy resources employed as weapons; and 3) the utilization of energy weaponization not only by undemocratic governments but also by democratic actors.

The events unfolding in the 2020s regarding the role of energy resources in political processes are highly dynamic, underscoring the need for ongoing study and a reassessment of existing approaches in light of emerging trends and challenges. This study examines the strategic use of energy resources as a weapon by both undemocratic actors (e.g., Russia) and democratic entities (e.g., the EU and individual EU Member States).

METHODS

For scientific analysis, it is essential to identify the most suitable theory of international relations for studying energy resources as instruments of international policy. For a long time, the theoretical and methodological foundations for examining the weaponization of energy remained uncertain, resulting primarily in the use of descriptive methods and historical analysis to determine the role that energy resources may play in foreign policy. Some researchers have also applied geopolitical analysis. An example is "The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power" (2008) by Daniel Yergin, which is regarded as valuable for deepening the understanding of energy security issues and energy diplomacy, although a clear paradigm for analyzing the aggressive use of energy resources to achieve objectives in international policy is not offered in this work.

Energy resources as material elements of power in the realm of international relations are analyzed through both realism and idealism (Luft and Korin 2009, 340). However, these approaches differ significantly. Realists argue that, throughout human history, energy resources—including rare earth metals and minerals essential for green energy production—have held strategic value. They have repeatedly been used primarily by exporting states as instruments of foreign policy and have served as catalysts for armed conflicts. Idealists, in contrast, view energy market participants as rational actors motivated by profit maximization rather than conflict. Consequently, they downplay the influence of geopolitical, security, value-based, cultural, and other factors. Today, however, the significance of these factors is evident. This considerably undermines the position of idealism and strengthens the case for neorealism in the study of the weaponization of energy resources.

It is assessed that the theory of neorealism provides the most appropriate methodological foundation for analyzing the role of energy resources in foreign policy. Neorealism holds that energy resources can function as instruments of foreign policy pressure. Such instruments are employed when particular actors in international politics seek to expand their influence or secure specific concessions from other actors. Although realism is commonly

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associated with hard power, its material, non-military basis can take various forms, energy resources being a prime example. A range of scholars supports this view. For instance, Legro and Moravcsik (1999, 18) rightly note that control over material resources, including energy, lies at the heart of realism in world politics.

It is acknowledged, following Česnakas (2010), that realist theories provide a valuable starting point for moving beyond purely descriptive approaches in the study of energy resources in foreign policy. Energy resources are treated as material objects within a materialist ontology. Accordingly, the realism paradigm is considered particularly suited for analyzing the weaponization of energy resources.

Long before the current escalation of global instability, Klare (2009) warned of a "potential war between major powers" (p. 40) over control of energy resources. In such a scenario, energy resources would become targets of military action. Klare argues that states are prepared to use military force to secure these resources. This is driven by factors such as rising production levels and population growth, which make modern states increasingly dependent on a certain amount of energy resources. Under contemporary conditions, energy resources have emerged as a critical material determinant of state power.

The realism paradigm centers on the role of states as the primary actors shaping energy relations on a global scale. States are generally unwilling to relinquish control over energy resources to international energy companies, free market mechanisms, or supranational organizations. The majority of large oil and gas companies are state-owned, controlling 75-80% of the world's fossil fuel reserves (Sustainable Finance Observatory 2019). Energy-exporting states are not only consolidating their control over these resources but are also increasingly using them as tools to advance their national foreign policy interests.

The above suggests that the idealistic paradigm is ill-suited to explain the processes of energy resource use in international politics, as states remain the primary actors shaping energy policy. Energy resources have already become instruments in the pursuit of state power. Realism, however, cannot fully explain why some energy-rich states utilize their resources as tools of pressure in international relations, while others refrain from doing so.

Neorealism, as an evolution of classical realism, focuses on the international system as a whole but often struggles to explain behavior at the level of individual states. Understanding the role of energy resources in foreign policy requires analysis at the unit level, since states are not as homogeneous as neorealists assume. Consequently, neorealism faces challenges in fully accounting for the role of energy resources in international politics. This recognition contributed to the development of defensive realism and offensive realism.

Defensive realism posits that states seek to enhance their international influence primarily to ensure their own security. They resort to various means of strengthening their influence, including the weaponization of energy resources, not because their power has necessarily increased, but because they feel insecure or act preemptively in response to security challenges. In this framework, the central motive for states is security, with the understanding that increasing their influence enhances their security. From the standpoint of defensive realism, states are inclined to pursue different forms of expansion when their security is perceived as vulnerable.

Undemocratic states provide vivid examples of this behavior. For instance, in response to international sanctions related to its aggressive policy toward Ukraine, Russia imposed

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conditions on the supply of its energy resources to "unfriendly states," beginning with demands for payment in rubles for exported gas. Similarly, Iran has repeatedly threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz in response to Western sanctions; in June 2025, its parliament approved a bill to close this crucial channel. This is a significant example of the weaponization of energy resources, as more than one-fifth of the world's oil supplies pass through the Strait of Hormuz on a daily basis. Algeria offers another example: it has repeatedly reduced or blocked gas supplies through the Maghreb–Europe Gas Pipeline (also known as the Pedro Duran Farell pipeline) via Morocco to Spain due to political disputes over Western Sahara.

Offensive realism, which has been developing since the early 2000s, rests on the idea that "security in the international system is scarce" (Orban 2008, 15). Accordingly, "security requires acquiring as much power compared to other states as possible" (Elman 2007, 18; Labs 1997). This means that power equates to security for states. Since security is very limited, states compete to acquire as much power as possible to ensure protection against other states. In offensive realism, security is primarily defined by military power. In contemporary practice, however, states use a wide range of tools to consolidate their positions, and the weaponization of energy resources is one of them. Energy resources can become decisive for military power because they allow for the financing of the defense sector and the waging of wars; Russia provides a clear example. Furthermore, energy resources pave the way for economic prosperity, and the financial power of the state can easily be transformed into military potential (Orban 2008, 15). Offensive realism methodologically contributes to understanding the role of energy resources in the foreign policy of energy-exporting states, since the income from the sale of these resources is used to enhance military readiness and strengthen military power.J. Mearsheimer argues that states can never truly be secure and that only through power maximization can states ensure their survival (Mearsheimer 2001, 61).

It is worth noting that in the scientific discourse, researchers also point to the other models of realism, such as neoclassical realism, and emphasize their adaptability for studying the processes of weaponization of energy resources. Setting aside methodological debates about the directions of realism, we come to the understanding that this conceptual approach is appropriate for analyzing the issues of the weaponization of energy resources as instruments of foreign policy.

RESULTS

Weaponizing Energy in Contemporary International Politics

The strategic significance of energy resources for the functioning of any state and society represents both a source of strength and a potential vulnerability. Consequently, these resources become instruments in the hands of international policy actors seeking to achieve specific foreign policy objectives and are subject to political negotiation. Geopolitical competition among states is increasingly evident in the energy sector. This struggle is waged not only over energy resources themselves, but also through the deployment of energy infrastructure, skilled personnel, and advanced energy technologies.

The concept of energy as a weapon entails the use of trade in energy resources, including oil, gas, coal, fuel oil, and electricity from the power grid, as a tool to achieve political,

diplomatic, or other strategic goals. This often manifests as the termination or restriction of energy supplies, the refusal to import energy for non-commercial reasons, the unilateral imposition of significant price increases contrary to prior agreements, the establishment of control over energy infrastructure, or targeted damage to such infrastructure. This list is not exhaustive, as there are numerous additional methods by which energy can be wielded as a strategic instrument.

The use of energy resources as a weapon can generate significant political consequences, including encroachments on state sovereignty aimed at controlling the extraction and distribution of natural resources. The weaponization of energy involves leveraging energy resources, infrastructure, and related assets as instruments of coercion and power in the international arena, with motivations that can vary widely. Typical manifestations include price wars, manipulation of energy supplies, the imposition of sanctions, unlawful seizure and control of other states' energy facilities, and the sabotage of energy infrastructure. Both producer and consumer states, as well as transit states, resort to energy weaponization. Energy resources serve as a primary foreign policy tool in non-authoritarian states, where rents from fossil fuels significantly influence foreign policy priorities (Khoma and Vdovychyn 2024). Democratic actors also employ this tool, albeit with different objectives and mechanisms.

Energy can function as a weapon on both the supply and demand sides of the market. The weaponization of energy inevitably produces economic, political, and social losses, and in extreme cases, may pose direct threats to human life and health. It can take the form of a business strategy grounded in specific values and principles, or manifest as energy terrorism. In the context of open, non-hybrid armed conflicts, such as the Russian-Ukrainian war, energy weaponization can reach extreme levels, including the demolition of energy facilities, destruction of generation capacity, and provocation of large-scale artificial disasters, as exemplified by attacks on nuclear reactors.

The control exercised by certain states (particularly non-democratic ones) over energy infrastructure and the supply of energy resources carries significant strategic implications. While the risks associated with such control have long been recognized, they have often been underestimated. Given the economic and social importance of energy, supply disruptions can pose a threat to stability at all levels. This potential for destabilization is precisely what states exploit when employing energy pressure, blackmail, or even acts of energy-related terrorism. Nevertheless, the politicization of energy also generates positive outcomes: it creates incentives to explore new energy sources and diversify supplies, thereby mitigating the risks associated with reliance on a single provider.

Fossil fuels constitute a critical component of the foreign policy toolkit of neo-authoritarian states. Russia is a striking example of this. Scientific literature already presents approaches to the content of a neo-authoritarian regime and reveals the foreign policy of states with this type of regime (Glukhova 2019; Khoma and Nikolaieva 2023; Khoma and Vdovychyn 2024; Krastev 2011; Lewis 2020; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Wiatr 2019). In such states, rents from fossil fuel exports contribute to aggressive foreign policy behavior. Revenues from fossil fuel exports are primarily directed toward the development of the defense-industrial complex, the accumulation of weapons stockpiles aimed at other states, and arms exports supporting neo-authoritarian regimes. Energy-rich neo-authoritarian states utilize energy exports defensively: to prevent external interference, ensure regime survival, and promote neo-

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authoritarian influence abroad. Consequently, these states use energy resources both as instruments of coercion against other states and as mechanisms of punishment for perceived hostile or critical behavior. This strategic application of energy allows non-democratic regimes to insulate themselves from external pressure, pursue repressive domestic policies, and conduct destabilizing foreign policies with relative impunity.

From another perspective, democratic states that purchase energy from neo-authoritarian regimes inadvertently reinforce non-democratic governments and, in doing so, undermine the stability of democracy.

The confrontation between the EU and Russia in the 2020s is by no means the first instance of energy resource weaponization in recent history. In 1973, Arab states halted oil exports to the United States and other Western countries that supported Israel in conflicts with its Middle Eastern neighbors (Zakariah 2011). The supply cutoffs were designed to inflict economic losses on adversaries and extract political concessions. OPEC explicitly employed oil as a weapon against Western states backing Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War (LaBelle 2020, 533). Following the outbreak of the conflict, Arab OPEC Member States agreed to leverage oil supplies strategically against pro-Israel Western countries. The oil embargo was primarily a political measure: OPEC nations reduced oil production not only to influence global prices in their favor, but also to achieve broader political objectives, principally to exert pressure on the international community to curtail Western support for Israel.

The embargo and subsequent surge in oil prices precipitated a severe economic crisis in the West, with oil prices increasing from $2.90 to $11.65 per barrel in 1974 (Corbett 2013). Oil thus became a weapon of energy diplomacy, deployed against pro-Israel governments in the West. Energy diplomacy has manifested itself here as a sphere of international relations focused on the use of energy resources and technologies as instruments of political influence. European countries were particularly affected, given OPEC's control of approximately two-thirds of the world's proven oil reserves. The crisis prompted Western states to reconsider aspects of energy security, though many institutional and regulatory mechanisms to address such vulnerabilities remained underdeveloped at the time.

It is worth noting that, in recent history, numerous states have utilized oil as a political instrument, and the examples are not limited to 1973 (Hafner, Raimondi, and Bonometti 2023). Historically, the United States has imposed more oil embargoes than any other country, including an embargo against Japan prior to World War II (Crane et al. 2009). Importantly, political motives are not always the primary driver behind the weaponization of energy resources. For instance, Saudi Arabia has at times flooded the market with cheap oil to penalize rival oil-exporting states such as Iran and Russia. A notable example is the 2020 economic dispute, initiated by Saudi Arabia to punish Russia for its refusal to reduce oil production and thereby stabilize global oil prices during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ma, Xiong and Bao 2021). Each instance of energy resource weaponization, therefore, exhibits distinct characteristics.

Thus, energy has become a contemporary instrument of coercion, used to exert pressure on sovereign states and alliances. Trade in energy resources serves not only as a demonstration of power but also as a means to encroach upon the sovereignty of other states.

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Prerequisites for Russia's Use of Energy as a Weapon

Currently, Russia serves as the primary example of energy resource weaponization. Prior to 2022, Europe was heavily reliant on natural gas imports from Russia. For natural gas, the EU's import dependency was 84% in 2020. Russia was the largest supplier of gas to the EU; for example, in 2020, more than 40% of the EU's total natural gas imports came from Russia (Di Bella et al. 2024). Over the past several years, Russia has relied on limiting gas flows to EU Member States, while the EU has, in turn, restricted Russia's access to its energy markets. Both actions exemplify the strategic use of energy as a coercive tool and have generated significant economic and political repercussions.

It is important to recognize that the weaponization of energy resources by Putin's regime did not emerge recently, but has its roots in the Soviet period. For example, in 1968, a Soviet-Austrian agreement was signed for the supply of gas from the USSR to Austria, under which Austria provided pipelines and financing for their construction, while the USSR committed to supplying gas (Iber and Huber 2024). Similarly, in 1970, the Federal Republic of Germany concluded an agreement with the USSR regarding the supply of natural gas in exchange for the construction of gas pipelines (Schattenberg 2022). These examples illustrate the emergence of the USSR as a European energy powerhouse. The expansion of oil and gas pipeline networks provided the Soviet regime with strategic advantages by creating a system of energy-dependent states in Central and Eastern Europe (Högselius 2013). Industries and households across many European countries became heavily reliant on Soviet, and subsequently Russian, energy resources (Högselius 2013; LaBelle 2020; Ostrowski 2022). The energy supply chains established since the 1960s are now disintegrating (Gustafson 2020; Högselius 2013). This primarily affects Central European states that were once part of the Warsaw Pact, as well as the sovereign states of the Baltic region, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The result of the rapprochement between European states and Russia on the energy front was the growth of interdependence between European states and the USSR. The Soviet regime received hard currency from the export of oil and gas resources, even though these revenues helped finance an aggressive foreign policy. It refers to the war in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, which the USSR partially financed, thanks to the income from the sale of fossil fuels (Gaidar 2007; Gustafson 2020, 143; LaBelle 2023, 533-534).

Oil and gas resources differ from imports of other goods (such as diamonds or furs) because of their importance to the smooth functioning and upward dynamics of the economy. At that time, European states considered the benefits of interdependence to outweigh the cost of their own energy independence (Keohane and Nye 1989, 9-10).

Regarding the states that were part of the USSR, the Soviet regime applied energy pressure on the eve of the actual collapse of the USSR. In particular, in 1990, the supply of oil to the future independent Baltic States was interrupted (Collins 2017). It was an unsuccessful attempt to suppress the nascent independence movement of the region. In the following years, Russian gas production and distribution corporations, as well as state-owned oil and gas companies, began to manipulate the prices and physical volumes of crude oil and natural gas supplies (Newnham 2011). Moreover, this was usually done under conditions of political tension to put pressure on consumers. Such examples have occurred over the past three decades in Georgia, Estonia, Lithuania, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Belarus, Slovakia, Poland, and Ukraine.

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The basis of most such manipulations is geopolitics rather than corporate profitability. Sharp fluctuations in gas prices closely correlate with political developments. Oil and gas are strategic commodities for Russia, as they are for other neo-authoritarian states, so energy policy decisions are never made in a geopolitical vacuum.

Ukraine illustrates the latter thesis. It is worth noting that, for the first time, Ukraine received gas in September 1993 in exchange for part of the Black Sea Fleet, thereby weakening its position (Kuzio and D'Anieri 2018). As soon as geopolitical tension between Ukraine and Russia escalated in various years of the post-Soviet era, it immediately impacted the oil and gas sector. Thus, during the presidency of the pro-Western V. Yushchenko, who strengthened cooperation with the EU and NATO, there were two such crises: 1) in March 2005; 2) in December 2008 (Stern 2006; The Russian–Ukrainian Gas Dispute 2009). Following the annexation of Crimea, Gazprom increased the price of gas exported to Ukraine from $268.50 to $485 per 1,000 m^3 (Umbach 2014).

Long before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, researchers warned that from a security perspective, threats that destabilize the supply of energy resources are severe for European states (Bouzarovski, Bradshaw and Wochnik 2015). In 2009, under the influence of Russia's invasion of Georgia (August 2008), intellectuals of Central and Eastern Europe (Wałęsa, Havel, Krastev, etc.) wrote an open letter to the administration of Barack Obama (Gazeta Wyborcza 2009). It expresses concerns about Europe's dependence on Russian energy resources. The letter emphasizes that the threat to energy supplies can harm the political sovereignty of Central and Eastern European states. For the signatories, the issues of sovereignty, military threats, and energy security were seen as an interconnected whole. In 2014, Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, with subsequent energy supply problems, confirmed what European intellectuals had warned about. The warning of former Polish Prime Minister D. Tusk in the spring of 2014 should also be paid attention to: "Regardless of how the standoff over Ukraine develops, one lesson is clear: excessive dependence on Russian energy makes Europe weak" (Collins 2017, 1).

Significant revenues from fossil fuels over the past two decades allowed Russia to rapidly develop its defense-industrial complex and build up weapons that have been directed against Ukraine since 2014 and are also used in other countries of the world, and exported to support neo-authoritarian regimes. Consequently, oil and gas resources are a significant factor in Russia's aggressive foreign policy, from the war in Afghanistan to the conflict with Ukraine. Russia is a state where fossil fuel rents contribute to its aggressive foreign policy (Van de Graaf and Colgan 2017, 59).

Russia's behavior in relation to energy resources is determined not only by the wealth of its subsoil but also by the extensive system of pipeline networks, which was partially created during the Soviet era. This has created a system in which third countries are dependent on Russia for the supply of energy resources. Such energy dependence has created wider economic and political dependence and has become a source of power for the Putin regime. Let us recall Colgan's term "petro-aggression" to describe a situation in which states where oil accounts for more than 10% of GDP are 250% more likely to instigate military conflicts with other states (Colgan 2010, 2013). Russia's weaponization of energy is part of the government's "divide and rule" strategy. It was, and still is, strategically important for Russia to dominate the EU energy market and influence political decisions through its control of energy resources.

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Russia's Weaponization of Energy Against the EU

Russia is the world's largest exporter of natural gas, the second-largest exporter of oil, and the third-largest exporter of coal (International Energy Agency 2020). Like other energy-rich undemocratic states, Russia uses its energy wealth for at least three purposes: 1) to obtain economic benefits; 2) to support, expand, and exercise political influence within its sphere of interest; and 3) to exert political pressure on importing countries.

In the case of the EU, Russia has long leveraged its position as a major energy supplier to advance its strategically important interests. The network of energy connections with consumers, transit states, and consumer states was so complex that, after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, the EU did not even impose sanctions on the energy sector of the aggressor state (Korteweg 2018). Experiencing actual impunity, Russian corporations such as Rosneft and Gazprom continued to abuse their dominant market position in pursuit of their strategic goals.

The question of the price of energy resources and the uninterrupted supply of them has always been closely tied to Russia's foreign policy priorities. There are instances in which Russia lowered the price of energy sources or postponed payments, only to cancel these concessions once the political environment shifted. Furthermore, the contract terms prevented gas buyers from reselling the resource to a third party or from purchasing gas through an alternative pipeline route. In particular, in 2006 and 2009, the price of gas was changed for Ukraine. Discriminatory pricing was also applied to the Baltic States after they acceded to the EU, and to Moldova after the arrival of a pro-Western government in 2021, among others. These contract terms allowed Russia to maintain a fragmented European market, and Gazprom offered different prices to different buyers. This policy of using the export of energy resources for intimidation is a demonstration of Russian realpolitik.

In 2021, Russia restricted gas supplies in order to force the EU to withdraw its support for Ukraine and to obtain the lifting of sanctions. For example, in the fourth quarter of 2021, the Russian company Gazprom reduced its gas exports to the EU by 25% compared to the same period in 2020 (Milov 2022). Russia referred to energy blackmail, demanding that the certification of Nord Stream 2 be expedited. This is an example of Russian "energy games," which took place simultaneously with Russia's build-up of the army near the borders of Ukraine.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the EU's introduction of several waves of sanctions, the energy blackmail by Russia intensified. For example, in June 2022, the supply of natural gas through the Nord Stream 1 gas pipeline had already been reduced by 75%. In July 2022, the supply was suspended for 10 days, and in August 2022, the pipeline was finally shut down. In a speech on August 8, 2022, Putin spoke about the potential catastrophic consequences for the global energy market (Sheppard and Polina 2022) in response to the sanctions imposed against Russia, and once again turned energy into a weapon. Similarly, the sanctions imposed by Europe and its allies on Russia created their own energy weapon on the demand side.

A sudden interruption of energy supply is also an example of the weaponization of energy resources. For example, RAO Nordic, a subsidiary of the Russian energy company Inter RAO, has not supplied electricity to Finland since May 15, 2022 (Reuters 2022b). The Russian side explained this by problems with payment for the consumed energy, but in fact, it is one of

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Russia's responses to Finland's sanctions policy. In this case, Russia's actions did not have a significant impact on consumers because only 10% of Finland's electricity consumption came from Russia, and the government quickly found an alternative. Another example is Gazprom's decision in April 2022 to halt gas supplies to the natural gas distribution companies Bulgargaz (Bulgaria) and PGNiG (Poland) due to non-payment in rubles, which is indicative of the weaponization of energy resources (Deutsche Welle 2022).

Russia expected that the artificially created energy crisis would become a point of division within the EU. However, this did not happen, although the impact of Russian gas blackmail was primarily felt through reductions in household income, declines in industrial production, and similar effects. With Putin-style statements such as, "We will not supply gas, oil, coal, heating oil – we will not supply anything," and threats to "freeze Europe" (Reuters 2022a), Russia demonstrated its use of fossil fuels as a weapon. Shortages and supply interruptions seriously harmed the European economy and created a threat to the legitimacy of governments, which can be seen as an encroachment on Europe's energy sovereignty. By reducing supplies, Russia placed EU states in an economically vulnerable position and threatened the political legitimacy of EU institutions and national governments.

Another example of Russia's use of energy as a strategic tool is its nuclear energy program. Russia remains one of the leading actors in the global nuclear sector. However, the international community has not sufficiently addressed the potential risks posed by its dominance in the nuclear technology market. This sector has largely escaped EU sanctions, and some countries, including France and Hungary, have, for various reasons, blocked the imposition of restrictions on the Russian nuclear industry, including Rosatom. Rosatom has been active in the international nuclear energy market for many years and is recognized as a major provider of critical services for reactor construction projects. Through its subsidiary TVEL, Rosatom supplies nuclear fuel, controlling 38% of the global uranium conversion capacity and 46% of the uranium enrichment capacity (Szulecki and Overland 2023). Russia has been a key supplier of approximately half of all international agreements related to nuclear power plant construction, reactor and fuel provision, and the decommissioning or disposal of nuclear waste. Its direct control over numerous nuclear reactors and strategic energy infrastructure provides a basis for exerting political leverage.

Currently, Russia's use of energy resources as a weapon is yielding negative consequences for itself, including economic losses and constraints on its geopolitical influence. For instance, Russian oil is currently selling at roughly half the global reference price, and the lengthy and costly transport routes to China and India significantly reduce state revenues. Thus, the weaponization of energy can ultimately backfire on those who attempt to wield it.

The EU's Weaponization of Energy Against Russia

Although the EU is primarily a consumer rather than a supplier of energy resources, it nonetheless exerts leverage and inflicts losses due to interdependencies in oil and gas. These dynamics vividly illustrate how fossil fuels can be employed as instruments of coercion by actors with differing values, objectives, and political regimes. Since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, the EU has implemented sanctions and embargoes targeting companies in the oil and gas sector,

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including Rosneft, Gazprombank, Vnesheconombank, Novatek, and Feodosiia Enterprise for the Supply of Oil Products, among others (European Commission 2025).

In December 2022, the EU introduced a price cap on crude oil, followed by a cap on Russian oil products, including diesel and fuel oil, in February 2023. By leveraging its institutional and regulatory capacities, the EU inflicted financial harm on the aggressor state. Russia's energy sovereignty, its right to sell fossil fuels, was thereby challenged, generating a broad spectrum of geopolitical and economic risks. The Russian strategy of exploiting interdependence with European states, established as far back as the 1970s, to impede the EU's full support for Ukraine has thus been met with a firm and coordinated countermeasure.

Individual EU Member States, both independently and in coordination with others, have employed energy as a tool of coercion against Russia. For instance, the Baltic States completely ceased importing electricity from Russia (Fang et al. 2024). Transmission system operators in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania decided to disconnect from the Russian-controlled network and synchronize with the continental European grid, ENTSO-E. In parallel, the Baltic States collectively withdrew from the BRELL agreement[1], which was concluded with Russian and Belarusian operators. On February 9, 2025, the Baltic States completed synchronization with the Continental European grid.

It is noteworthy that since 2009, the EU has maintained a special mechanism for reviewing energy projects, commonly referred to as the Gazprom clause[2]. This mechanism requires Member States to assess the energy security risks posed by non-EU investors in their national transmission systems. On this basis, Germany suspended the certification of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in February 2022, pending a revised security assessment in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Had it become operational, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline would have enabled Russia to further pursue aggressive political objectives through the use of energy as a weapon. The war in Ukraine prompted the European Commission to call for heightened vigilance regarding Russian and Belarusian direct investment, given the strong incentives for these governments to interfere in critical sectors of EU Member States' infrastructure (European Commission 2022).

It is essential to note that the energy relations between Russia and individual EU Member States exhibit distinct characteristics shaped by historical circumstances. Even in 2023, when the EU imposed an embargo on Russian oil and gas, certain exemptions applied to particular countries and products. These exceptions primarily concerned post-communist states that remain critically dependent on Russian supplies and currently lack viable alternatives (European Council 2023).

Energy as a weapon is already a reality. Arguments in support of this view were presented in the study. In this context, it can be concurred with Boute (2022), who states that

[1]The BRELL system, developed during the Soviet era, connected the energy grids of Belarus, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The BRELL agreement, signed in 1998, kept the Baltic states' energy networks synchronized with the Integrated Power System/United Power System, coordinated by a central dispatch in Moscow. This dependence created a significant political and economic vulnerability for the Baltic states (Tatarėlytė 2025).

[2]The "Gazprom clause" stipulates that non-EU companies cannot control transmission systems or transmission system operators unless: 1) there is an agreement between the European Union and the country where these non-EU companies are based, and 2) the companies can demonstrate that they are not influenced by an operator engaged in the production or supply of gas or electricity, or by a third country (Lexology 2025).

"with energy used as a weapon, reform of the liberal energy regime is needed to allow states to prevent the creation of dependencies and protect their energy security in the new geopolitical reality" (p. 740).

CONCLUSION

The study's findings demonstrate that, in contemporary international relations, states increasingly employ energy resources as instruments of influence and coercion to advance specific objectives. For at least half a century, energy has been used as a form of strategic leverage, exerting pressure on both sovereign states and alliances. While earlier instances of such practices were recorded, none approached the scale observed over the past fifty years.

Today, energy remains a critical lever in international affairs. The trade in energy resources functions not only as a means of projecting power but also as a mechanism for encroaching upon the sovereignty of other states.

The results of the study confirmed the working hypotheses: 1) Energy resources serve as a form of weapon employed by states and alliances, generating significant political consequences; 2) The weaponization of energy resources is not exclusive to neo-authoritarian regimes; democratic states and their alliances also utilize such strategies.

As interdependence among states in the energy sphere deepens, it carries the potential to inflict severe economic and political harm, disrupting households' livelihoods, eroding governmental legitimacy, and beyond. The principal methods of weaponization include terminating or restricting supplies, suspending imports for non-commercial reasons, unilaterally raising prices in violation of prior agreements, gradually consolidating control over energy infrastructure, or deliberately damaging such infrastructure. The weaponization of energy thus generates significant economic, political, and social costs.

Both producer and consumer states engage in the weaponization of energy. Energy can be wielded as a tool of coercion on both the demand and supply sides: not only the refusal to deliver resources but also the refusal to purchase them constitutes a form of energy weaponization. Such practices rarely occur unilaterally, and the EU–Russia case serves as confirmation of this. Russia has restricted supplies and raised the price of fossil fuels. At the same time, the EU has deployed its institutional leverage, depriving the aggressor state of vital revenues from its oil and gas sector.

It is essential to recognize that the current weaponization of energy under the Putin regime did not emerge abruptly. Its foundations were laid during the Soviet era, beginning in the 1960s. At that time, supply chains were established, and an extensive network of oil and gas pipelines and related infrastructure was constructed to deliver energy to what would later become EU Member States. Over time, this created a bloc of countries dependent on Soviet fossil fuels, even as Moscow pursued an aggressive foreign policy (for example, the war in Afghanistan) and maintained a non-democratic regime. Today, Europe's democratic states are dismantling energy supply chains that have been in place for decades, a process that exerts painful consequences on industry, households, governmental stability, and beyond.

The prospects for EU Member States to eliminate specific dependencies on Russia, such as in the nuclear sector, remain uncertain, and some EU Member States, even under current conditions, continue to cooperate with the aggressor state (for instance, Hungary). Nevertheless,

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a positive trend that emerged in 2023, and which also illustrates the weaponization of energy, is the agreement among a group of states to expel Russia from the international nuclear energy market.

Given that energy is, and will remain at least in the medium term, a strategic instrument of coercion, it is essential to formulate policies and develop infrastructure, both at the national and EU levels, that can mitigate or even preempt external leverage over governments and reinforce energy security within the new geopolitical reality. Russia's war against Ukraine has triggered a global reassessment of states' dependence on Russian energy and related infrastructure. While the EU is no longer as critically dependent on Russian resources as it was prior to 2022, it has yet to extricate itself from Moscow's influence fully. Moreover, EU Member States continue to diverge in their approaches to energy cooperation with Russia.

The EU's current commitment to phasing out Russian gas by 2027, as outlined in the updated REPowerEU roadmap, is a promising development. Similarly, the efforts of Member States to secure alternatives to Russian nuclear fuel are also promising. No new contracts for Russian gas imports will be concluded, and existing contracts are scheduled to expire by 2027. In parallel, another energy transition is underway, with biogas, biomethane, and other clean energy sources assuming an increasingly prominent role. Moreover, nearly every new package of anti-Russian sanctions now includes measures targeting the energy sector. Collectively, these steps could function as a safeguard against the weaponization of energy.

At the same time, it is essential to recognize that Russia continues to develop methods for circumventing Western sanctions. Tactics include the deployment of shadow fleets, man-in-the-middle schemes, traceability fraud, supply chain manipulation, and the establishment of shell companies. Given the critical role of energy revenues in sustaining the Russian economy, it is evident that the EU and other democratic actors must remain prepared to confront ongoing efforts at energy weaponization, even after the formal cessation of Russian gas imports.

The processes of weaponizing energy resources are likely to have far-reaching implications for both international relations and energy security. For international relations, these consequences may include: 1) the transformation of energy from a domain of mutually beneficial cooperation into a fully-fledged arena of geopolitical confrontation; 2) the further fragmentation of the political order, as energy resources reinforce the division of the world into blocs of democratic and neo-authoritarian states that approach energy in fundamentally different ways; and 3) the erosion of international legal norms and trust, resulting from manipulations of energy supplies.

For energy security, the potential consequences include: 1) the acceleration of diversification processes within the EU to minimize dependence on a single supplier; 2) the risk of excessive reliance on new energy partners; and 3) turbulence in energy markets, as weaponization generates price shocks, shortages, and instability.

Thus, the current weaponization of energy resources in Russia–EU relations transforms energy from an economic sphere into a geopolitical arena, creates new divisions in international relations, reshapes the structure of the EU's energy security, and simultaneously stimulates a global shift toward alternative energy sources. The politicization of energy-related decisions is intensifying: energy is increasingly regarded not merely as an economic commodity, but as an instrument of national security.

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The issue of weaponizing energy resources is highly dynamic, with new manifestations, actors, and instruments continually emerging. This study focuses on the most significant aspects of the weaponization of energy resources between the EU and Russia. Ongoing developments call for further assessment of this phenomenon in EU–Russia relations. Such developments include the adoption of new packages of anti-Russian sanctions, violations by Russian fighter jets of the security zone around drilling platforms in the Baltic Sea, and other forms of energy-resource weaponization.

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Nataliia Khoma: conceptualization, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, resources, writing – original draft, project administration. **Maiia Nikolaieva:** visualization, investigation, supervision, writing – review & editing, formal analysis, validation.

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