

EU Climate Policy: Poland Leads Revolt Over Russia Fears

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Poland has claimed that it has assembled enough votes to block a landmark EU climate change agreement after spearheading a revolt by Eastern European states that fear the package would increase their dependence on Russian natural gas supplies.

A six nation bloc on the EU's eastern fringes signed a pact to fight a proposal designed to cut carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions by a fifth by 2020.

The target represents the EU's landmark initiative to address the pressures of climate change and would return the continent's output of CO₂ to 1990 levels.

Poland has led efforts to fend off adoption of the package. An aide to the country's environment minister, Maciej Nowicki said Greece had joined the opposition, alongside Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria,

"Poland's Environment Minister signed in Greece an agreement referring to the climate package," Joanna Mackowiak, a ministry spokeswoman said. "We have the blocking minority."

While viewed in Brussels as a necessary act of leadership in the climate change debate by Europe, the proposal has been criticised for granting an unfair advantage to the richer Western European nations.

In particular introducing a 100 per cent auction of carbon trading quotas by 2013 is likely to force the closure of heavy polluting coal power stations and force the Eastern states to build natural gas facilities that would buy Russian pipeline supplies.

Warsaw has vowed to avoid that prospect at all costs. "It's not the biggest success when you build up a blocking minority" said Miss Mackowiak. "It's when the minority sticks together to the very end."

While Poland currently relies on its domestic coal reserves to meet 90 per cent of its energy needs, other countries in the block fear they will be trapped in permanent dependence on the Kremlin.

"We are dependent on Russia for 97 per cent of our gas and more than 90 per cent of our petrol," said Jan Skoda, Slovakia's foreign ministry spokesman. "We're caught with a double-edged sword."

"We are concerned that dependence of any kind is not good for our or anybody's strategic interests. On the one hand we want to accept the protocol's conclusions, reduce carbon dioxide and proceed toward a healthier climate. On the other hand

we have to keep our capacity to compete."

Russia's lightning strike against Georgia in August raised fears of Moscow's strategic dominance over its near neighbours to the top of Europe's agenda.

But the aftermath of the war exposed divisions between Germany and other countries that hope to build alternative pipelines or resource routes and countries to end Russia's stranglehold on the European energy market, and those like Poland that want to stand up to Moscow.

German politicians have condemned the threat to derail the Commission's plan. Renate Kunast, chair of the German Green Party said: "Eastern Europe does not need coal, it needs to switch to a sustainable energy supply.

"This switch must be supported by Old Europe, and especially Germany. But using gas does not mean using natural gas from Russia. It means producing biogas. The countries in Eastern Europe have the potential to become biogas exporters."

But an advisor to the dominant Christian Democratic Union in the ruling coalition cautioned against an outright dismissal of the renegades position. "The Russians have used energy for political reasons," said Uwe Tager of the CDU.

"Belorussia had problems. Ukraine had problems. We're watching very carefully what's happening there. We have to help each other to avoid creating a divided energy policy with too much dependence."

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