

Energy Connectivity

**Green Electrification
Diplomacy: A Credibility Test
for the EU**

By Juan Carlos Leunissen

Series 1, Brief No. 3

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*European
Strategic
Policy*

EP

The EU's external energy partnerships will be credible only if they create tangible benefits for partner countries, rather than new dependencies.

Executive Summary

The emerging 'age of electricity' demands a fundamental reshaping of energy grids that support electrification. Being an inherently cross-border matter, such a transformation needs a global leader with ambition, credibility, and the capacity to build sustainable global partnerships. As a pioneer of the green transition, the EU has an opportunity to act as a global connector and advance cross-border green electrification partnerships that are strategic and inclusive.

However, the EU faces credibility challenges and to overcome them, its external energy partnerships must create tangible value for

partner countries. Examples from EU energy and electrification partnerships around the world show that partners face bureaucratic burdens, and in some contexts, the EU fails to meaningfully include local communities. The EU must ensure that its approach is not perceived as extractivist, focused only on energy supply, or centred on its own strategic priorities. To overcome these tensions, the EU should present its Global Gateway strategy as a development strategy that supports green energy corridors through genuine reciprocity, including with non-state actors and vulnerable groups.

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Key Recommendations

A Team Europe Initiative for electricity connectivity

Green electricity interconnectivity partnerships remain under-resourced and poorly integrated. The EU should mobilise a Team Europe Initiative for electricity connectivity and adapt lessons from the [German PtX Development Fund](#) for how grants, loans, equity and blended finance can make green energy projects bankable.

Launch a “Green Corridor” label

The European Commission should develop a “*Green Corridor*” Label for electricity interconnectors and grid projects, aligning [Projects of Mutual Interest \(PMI\)](#) with the shared energy priorities of EU Member States and third countries, including partners beyond the EU’s immediate neighbourhood. Projects should receive financial and permitting advantages only if they meet well-defined criteria on local grid benefits, environmental protection, community participation and fair distribution of benefits.

A leaner, more credible COP agenda

The EU should come to COP with fewer priorities, but a more credible agenda: green electrification, adaptation finance and just transition delivery. This requires showing leadership by example, including by agreeing internally on its own phase-out pathway and by making climate finance less dependent on rebranding existing commitments.

Fund Africa-Europe Investment Packages, don’t rebrand them

EU energy partnerships with African countries should not replace development cooperation. The Global Europe Instrument in the 2028-2034 MFF (the new EU budget) should contain [Africa-Europe Investment Packages](#) focusing on climate adaptation and resilience. Projects should not be a rebranding of old initiatives, but should support local grids, including through additional blended finance.

Make community ownership a condition

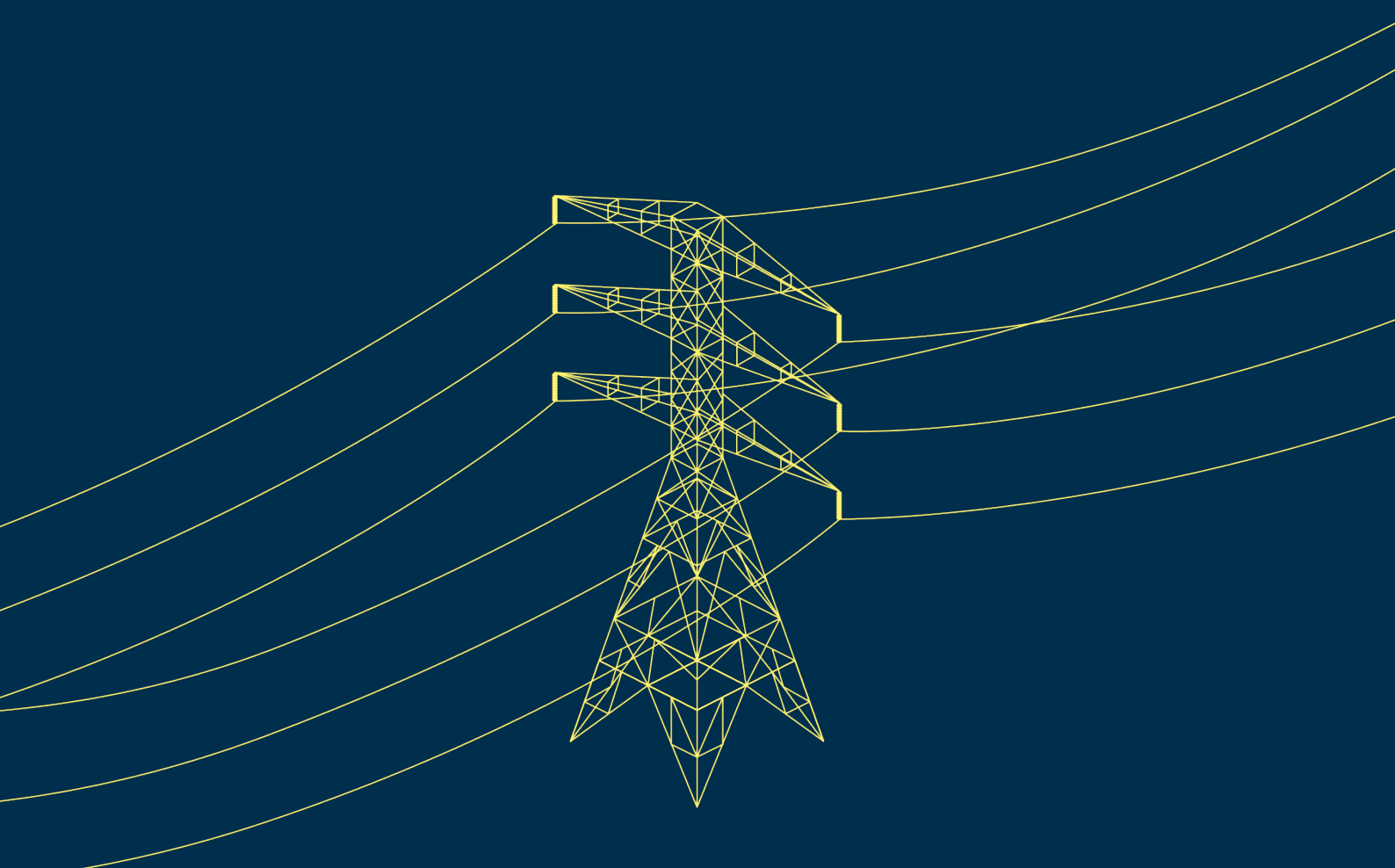
The European Commission should make community ownership and participation of Indigenous groups a condition for green energy and critical raw material projects. That includes revenue sharing and evaluations based on local social performance, in order to avoid situations such as the Atacama community affected by lithium extraction.

Give civil society a real seat in the Western Balkans

In the Western Balkans, electricity market integration should not be shaped only by governments, financial institutions and the private sector. Civil society organisations should have a stronger role in Energy Community fora through working groups and reform follow-up.

Assess political and social risk in Central Asia first

In Central Asia, the EU should introduce *Political Economy* and *Social Risk Assessment* before expanding green electricity corridors. Such an assessment would make it easier to understand how state actors, semi-state actors, and non-state actors shape the project environment and affect communities and vulnerable groups. It can also reduce the risk that EU cooperation is perceived as too eurocentric.



Europe's Electricity Partnerships Need Shared Resilience

The world is entering an *Age of Electricity*, writes the International Energy Agency (IEA), and it could not come at a more critical time for Europe. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has exposed the EU's dependence on fossil fuels at an alarming rate. Electrification and fossil fuel phase-out are therefore two sides of the same coin. Under an IEA scenario, electricity is expected to account for more than half of the global final energy consumption by 2050, and electrification will be a major theme for COP31.

“Electrification and fossil fuel phase-out are therefore two sides of the same coin.”

Yet, reducing that dependence is not merely about securing sufficient, sustainable energy supply. As Europe moves towards a more electrified system, it must also reimagine the energy links on which that system will depend. If the EU wants to prevent one dependency from simply being replaced by another, however, it must not only redesign its own energy grid, but also place electrification more centrally in its external policy.

In doing so, the challenge goes beyond identifying reliable partners for sustainable energy

supply. It raises wider questions regarding how Europe should structure new energy links, who would benefit from them, and what risks they may pose. Supply contracts must be complemented by shared investment, local grid development, environmental protection, fair access to energy and community involvement. Energy diplomacy is therefore not merely a technical issue, but a matter of governance, trust and political legitimacy. Without a clear commitment to building shared resilience, energy connectivity risks becoming hierarchical and extractive, rather than genuinely cooperative. This would weaken the credibility of the EU's external energy policy, put its global position at risk, and endanger the achievement of global climate objectives.

The EU has already been introducing a growing arsenal of policy instruments aimed at shaping its international role in the green energy transition. Through bilateral and multi-lateral climate partnerships and numerous Global Gateway projects, the EU and its Member States have attempted to address the global energy transition. In theory, this allows the EU to offer more than access to markets or demand for green energy: it ought to support the local development of energy systems, regional interconnections, jobs, and industrial capacity.

However, those ambitions are not unequivocally credible. For many partner countries and societies, EU green energy projects are not viewed in isolation. They are interpreted through a broader lens of debt burdens, extractive interests, unmet or slow climate finance promises, and European ambiguity around fossil fuels. This is of particular relevance with regard to the increased attention towards strategic autonomy as a central theme in EU policy debates. This emphasis is timely,

but also feeds an ambiguous perception; if green energy connectivity is framed too strongly around Europe's own strategic autonomy, it may deepen existing concerns about the credibility of the EU's external climate diplomacy. This perception is reinforced when different Commission departments and member states pursue their own deals. For partners, this can appear fragmented and transactional: is Global Gateway development cooperation, a commercial strategy, or is it geopolitics?

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This ambiguity underscores the importance of developing a credible green corridor label: one that is tied not only to sustainability standards, but also to meaningful participation by local communities and civil society. Without reciprocity and shared resilience, energy diplomacy may lose its credibility. The following selected cases illuminate where tensions arise in EU green electrification diplomacy.

Lessons from Africa: Beyond EU Templates

Those tensions are sharply illustrated by EU energy partnerships in Africa. There is persistent scepticism towards European initiatives

that are presented as sustainable and mutually beneficial. Actors fear that in practice, such partnerships are a disguise for a new sort of green extractivism. Sustainability is generally a shared Euro-African agenda priority, but contexts do not always align. While climate adaptation is a top priority for many African countries, EU strategies often place more emphasis on emission cuts and the energy transition. A green corridor centred primarily around exports or climate targets will therefore be viewed very differently from one that also supports local power grids, adaptation planning and access to energy in vulnerable countries. There is also mistrust about the scale and quality of European funding for climate adaptation. African partners point to the relabeling of existing funds and overpromises in financial commitments. This comes just as official development assistance (ODA) from EU institutions fell by 13.8% in 2025, feeding into the perception that the EU is acting in pursuit of its own strategic autonomy, rather than addressing the shared perils of climate change.

Lessons from Latin America: Community Agency

The same criticism surfaces in Latin America, where the EU's green agenda intersects with sensitive questions of indigenous rights and resource extraction. Tensions emerge around the interaction between the EU's green policy agenda and affected communities in third countries. The climate neutrality targets of the European Green Deal and the objectives of the

Critical Raw Materials Act for extraction, processing and recycling are part of a legitimate attempt at decarbonisation. However, they risk externalising environmental and social burdens. In Chile, Bolivia and Argentina, Indigenous peoples, such as Atacama communities, are affected by lithium projects. Concerns have been raised about water scarcity, ecological damage, and limited consultation. Similar concerns regarding environmental impact and Indigenous rights may arise for the power interconnection project between Colombia and Panama, subject to recent Global Gateway calls.

Lessons from the Western Balkans: Civic Participation

EU enlargement is increasingly relevant for the EU electrification efforts. Up to 70% of the electricity flowing through the Western Balkans ultimately ends up in the EU. Integration of electricity markets can accelerate the green energy transition, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, which remain highly dependent on coal for electricity generation.

Electricity market integration is thus not only an EU priority. For Western Balkan countries with EU ambitions, this is part of the regulatory convergence and alignment with the EU acquis, in which the Energy Community Electricity Integration Package plays a pivotal role. The first EU-Western Balkans electricity market coupling may take place in 2028 or 2029.

However, just as in other regions, the EU's efforts require inclusive strategies.

Civil society participation plays an important role as a societal bridge to represent local voices in the policy process. Not least is this the case for a green energy transition, which affects local employment and electricity prices, and which in turn can shape public support for EU integration. However, the involvement of civil society organisations in the revision of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans Action Plan is reportedly limited and inconsistent. Many organisations were excluded from working groups, while monitoring the sustainable transformation efforts.

Lessons From South Caucasus and Central Asia: Corridors that Deliver

Further into the South Caucasus and Central Asia, extending green electricity connectivity offers genuine strategic potential. The Caspian Sea alone is estimated to have 845 GW of offshore wind technical potential, nearly double that of the Black Sea. Armenia's grid modernisation, as a step towards a regional electricity corridor, and the planned trans-Caspian cable for green energy from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Europe are timely and strategically relevant. In Central Asia, the EU can use its comparative value by strengthening support for reliable data flow, smart metering and capacity-building with transmission sys-

tem operators. For that, it must better assess how state, semi-state and non-state actors shape the project environment. Otherwise, its approach risks being perceived as bureaucratic and Eurocentric, in particular when combined with EU strategic autonomy ambitions.

By contrast, China's approach, built around cooperation with authoritarian local elites, has in fact proven more effective at getting projects off the ground. However, its informal elite networks leave local residents, in particular vulnerable groups, poorly informed and excluded from decision-making, undermining public support as well. This allows China and local elites in Central Asia to amplify each other's framing of EU climate action, such as CBAM, as unfair external interference, and thereby justify delays in climate action.

Green Electrification Diplomacy Needs Legitimacy

The examples described above provide clear policy lessons. A credible strategy for green connectivity requires deeper changes regarding ownership and participatory governance. Communities, workers, civil society organisations, and Indigenous groups are often well placed to demonstrate whether a project is socially sustainable.

Credibility on green connectivity is much needed. The rather unambitious outcome of COP30 and the struggle to finance Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs) demonstrate

that the EU cannot afford a passive attitude. Even as China steps forward more assertively as a global leader in the green transition, there remains a need for an actor capable of linking green partnerships with trust, social protection and local development. The EU, however, faces a serious credibility deficit abroad, reinforced by internal fragmentation. It should not give up on taking a leadership role, but recover it through a more credible and focused COP agenda: one centred around electrification and just transition delivery and targeted enough to limit internal fragmentation. Where differences between EU Member States remain inevitable, Team Europe Initiatives can help move EU action forward.

Yet, the biggest challenge is whether the EU can show that green electrification diplomacy serves not only its own strategic autonomy and energy security, but also accelerates partnerships that create value in partner countries. It must build partnerships even when they do not proceed exactly as Europe would prefer. Only then can connectivity build shared resilience rather than replicate the dependencies Europe is trying to leave behind.

About the Author

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