
Coal power in the European Union

Karel VANHECKE

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Back in 1952, when the European Coal and Steel Community established a common market for the coal-producing industries of six European countries, coal mining was one of the main economic activities in Europe. Coal power was considered at that time a crucial factor for the development of the European economy. More than fifty years later, the European coal sector has dramatically declined, a significant number of mines and plants have been closed off and some national coal industries have even completely disappeared.

Yet, today most EU Member States rely on (mostly imported) coal to achieve their energy requirements. Various countries have confirmed that coal power will continue to be part of their energy mix. Moreover, the European Union's energy security concerns have shed new light on the use of coal power in the near future. Coal indeed presents attractive advantages in today's energy landscape. Coal reserves are vast and widely distributed throughout the world whilst the coal market is a well-functioning and relatively stable world market, particularly compared to oil and gas.

Nonetheless, coal power has one crucial disadvantage. It is by far the most polluting solid fuel. Coal-fired power plants are responsible for approximately one-fourth of human-produced carbon dioxide every year. In the light of the European Union's ambitious fight against climate change, it is obvious that the future of coal power in the EU depends upon a possible shift towards lower levels of CO₂ emissions and ultimately zero-emission power plants. The implementation of technological solutions seems to play a determining role in this respect.

This contribution considers the pros and cons of coal power, presents an overview of the status of the coal production and consumption in the Member States and discusses the European Union's policy towards the use of coal power.

Karel Van Hecke is researcher at the European Affairs Programme at EGMONT.