The Green Deal, National Energy and Climate Plans in Europe: Member States' Compliance and Strategies

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Abstract: This paper analyses the EU's policies for energy and climate, using Börzel's (2002) theoretical framework on Europeanisation, and examines member states' Green Deal responses, strategies, and compliance. As expressed in their final NECPs, although member states' responses vary, most of the critical components were partially addressed, while the others were largely addressed. We observe a considerable variation in Member State's strategies. Member States classified as foot-dragging beforehand are fence-sitting now, while those previously categorised as fence-sitting are now either foot-dragging or pace-setting. The root cause of these classification changes for the member states within the EU can be traced back to their internal environments in which the involved stakeholders each have a different response pace regarding environment, climate, and energy. We present and analyse our theoretical context, discuss the EU's energy policies and the NECPs, examine member states' responses and compliance with this new framework, and propose several challenges.

Keywords: European Union; Energy; Environment; Compliance; Green Deal; NECP; Strategy

1. Introduction

Energy policies, involving considerations of energy autonomy and environmental impacts, are a crucial issue for world economies and state governments. Recently, the International Energy Agency published an energy policy report confirming COVID-19's tremendous impact on the energy sector and forecasting an annual energy demand decline of 6 per cent in 2020   (International Energy Agency 2020). Due to the drastic COVID-19 government policies, this reduction will have an impact on both global CO_2 emissions and incomes, although only temporarily because it is not related to the structural transformation of economic and energy systems, and both governments and production sectors would prefer to postpone the Green Deal targets and limit emission standards (Le Quéré et al. 2020). The role of energy in climate change is challenging economies and lifestyles, being perceived as a catalyst for a second energy revolution that strives for a low carbon future, and the present situation's urgency has increased due to the recent pandemic (Yergin 2020). The European Union (EU) has also recognised energy and environmental issues as key and critical components, which resulted in the European Commission's 2020 decision to move forward with an unprecedented step that will lead to a so-called 'zero-carbon' economy. In this context, we must consider member states' alignment with the National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP), given the European Commission's general directions, as well as the limitations related to their compliance. This paper is the first to examine this topic or the first to analyse this topic using this particular framework.

Methodologically, in this context we analyse and evaluate the behaviour of the Member States using the data from the NECP's trying in parallel decode their strategies through the Börzel's (2002) theoretical framework. Thus, this paper analyses the EU's policies for energy and climate, using Börzel's (2002) theoretical framework on

Europeanisation, and examines member states' Green Deal responses, strategies, and compliance. As expressed in their final NECPs, although member states' responses vary, most of the critical components were partially addressed, while the others were largely addressed. When comparing these responses with Börzel's categorisations, some countries classified as foot-dragging beforehand are fence-sitting now, while those previously categorised as fence-sitting are now either foot-dragging or pace-setting. The root cause of these classification changes for the 27 member states within the EU can be traced back to their internal environments in which the involved stakeholders each have a different response pace regarding environment, climate, and energy. To fulfil this paper's aim, we present and analyse our theoretical context (the Europeanisation process), discuss the EU's energy policies and the NECPs, examine member states' responses and compliance with this new framework, and propose several challenges.

2. The Europeanisation process: A Theoretical Context

Although the multi-faceted process of Europeanisation does not provide the dynamics or complexities of European transformation (Olsen 2002), it can be a helpful research tool for providing information on the interactions between European and domestic actors (Radaelli 2004). To avoid several methodological issues that may affect our analysis (Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2009; Haverland 2006), we used Börzel's (2002) theoretical framework to examine member states' responses to Europeanisation, and the main actors' strategies and compliance with regards to the Green Deal and NECPs. In other words, this framework can help us examine how the member states both shape and adapt to these European policies. Börzel (2002) developed a theoretical framework that analyses three different strategies (pace-setting, foot-dragging, and fence-sitting), which represent differences in preferences and action capacities, to conceptually connect the two opposite dimensions of Europeanisation (bottom-up and top-down). According to Börzel (2002, p. 194) the three strategies are differentiated as: "pace-setting, i.e. actively pushing policies at the European level, which reflect a Member State's policy preference and minimize implementation costs; foot-dragging, i.e. blocking or delaying costly policies in order to prevent them altogether or achieve at least some compensation for implementation costs; and fence-sitting, i.e. neither systematically pushing policies nor trying to block them at the European level but building tactical coalitions with both pace-setters and foot-draggers". In this regard, energy-rich and climate sensitive EU member states, with energy intensive industries, actively push their policy preferences to the EU (pace-setting). On the other hand, foot-dragging is generally not a primary choice for member states, because the NECP is not binding, and finally fence-sitting is mostly linked with national priority setting, as is the case in Southern European countries that are more concerned with guiding specific actions to deal with climate issues, such as fires, floods, and environmental catastrophes (Aggestam and Pülzl 2020). Although almost 20 years have passed since it was first introduced, this framework continues to enable us to separate Member States' compliance with the various environmental and energy issues through its clear and concise categorization that provides to the researchers. In this paper, we will provide an up-to-date categorization of the Member State's behavior and strategies for the Green Deal evaluating the NECP's data.

Recently, more up to date literature has also been used to analyze other issues like for example Council's leadership and member state's behavior for environmental dynamics in the EU (see, Wurzel et al. 2019). Other scholars have used Börzel's framework to analyse and evaluate various topics, such as determining medium member states' roles in the creation of the European Monetary Union (Maes and Verdun 2005), identifying leaders and laggards in environmental policy (Liefferink et al. 2009), explaining the French policy on the EU's 'gouvernement économique' (Howarth 2007), etc. But even more recently, Micallef Grimaud (2018) used this framework to examine the EU's legislative decision-making processes, with regards to governmental power and influence, and Stegmann McCallion (2020) tested whether the EU's contemporary transformation became

more inter-governmental. In addition, Coman (2020) analysed the Romanian rotating EU council presidency, and Zaun (2020) examined the differences in the negotiation dynamics of the EU's asylum policies and its post-2016 reform deadlock. Other scholars used a slightly different theoretical context to examine leadership laggards, pioneers, pushers, and leaders with regards to the EU's environmental policies and climate governance (Jänicke and Wurzel 2018; Liefferink and Wurzel 2017; Wurzel et al. 2018).

In the past few years, scholars have also analysed Europeanisation's impact on environmental and energy politics, as well as state capacity and compliance. For example, Torney and O'Gorman (2019) assessed the EU's membership restrictions on Ireland's climate change and environmental policy. Others have investigated EU and member states' interactions in shaping the EU's renewable energy policy (Solorio Sandoval and Jörgens 2017). In this regard, Avrami and Sprinz (2018) discovered that the member states found many ways to escape the EU climate policy's limitations, due to the flexible Kyoto mechanisms and reduction targets. Other scholars have studied the economic crisis' influence on member states' degrees of implementation, arguing that it affected them in various ways and that the reduction in environmental rules was connected to reductions in economic activity (Melidis and Russel 2020). In the same vein, Solorio and Jörgens (2020) believed that during an economic crisis,   the Europeanisation of renewable energy policy can stimulate de-Europeanisation and probably a partial integration process withdrawal. Similarly, Tobin (2017) examined climate policy variations between developed states, finding Austria to be an interesting laggard in climate policy, and Aggestam and Pülzl (2020) assessed the EU's forest action plan, discovering different Europeanisation effects on EU member states. Furthermore, regarding Brexit's impact on environmental policies, Burns et al. (2019) observed that Europeanisation's influence is so important that even Brexit will not lead to environmental policy reversals. In terms of third countries, Iangbein and Börzel (2013) argued that many factors affect Eastern neighbourhood countries' influence on EU policy changes, and Hofmann et al. (2019) asserted that even third countries like Switzerland and Norway can shape the EU's energy policies, because of their accession and structural power.

On the other hand, even though the member states prefer to have control over energy policy issues, especially in times of crises, the European Commission found a way to expand supranational authority with the institutionalisation of new instruments centred on 'real-time compliance' (Maltby 2013; Thaler and Pakalkaite 2020). Indeed, this strategy is closely related to the European Commission's wider institutionalised efforts to prevent non-compliance (Falkner 2018; Scholten 2017),   which still remains a 'black-box' (Versluis 2007). However, energy policy involves both structural and political causes, as well as characteristics that may affect implementation and compliance (Van de Graaf et al., 2017). Based on Börzel and Buzogány (2019), country-specific variables, such as legal culture and administrative traditions, state power and capacity, political systems, and low socio-economic development, are the main causes of EU member states' non-compliance. Torney and O'Gorman (2019, p. 577-580) also found several reasons for this non-compliance, including member states' internal administrative structure fragmentation, lacking administrative capacities, weak internal institutions, the existence of 'veto players', and internal 'political and social activism'.

3. European Union's Policies for NECP's

For many years, energy politics in the EU was a voluntary process that relied on member states' good will (Behrens et al. 2011). For example, during the 1970s, when the famous oil crisis occurred, member states acted individually to implement energy policies (McGowan 2011). It appears that many political factors and perceptions affect member states' behaviours, as they have been reluctant for several years to disclose any energy security competencies to the European Commission (Pointvogl 2009). In the 1980s, even with the internal market's introduction, there was no vision to create a common energy policy, despite its importance for governments, interest groups, and the European Commission (Matlary 1997).

However, in the following period, it was envisioned that the EU should be able to tackle several challenges, such as growing imports and the environmental impact of energy production and use (Kanellakis et al. 2013). Accordingly, during the European Council meeting on 27 October 2005, the EU decided to officially establish a promising energy policy. Two year later, the European Commission published 'An Energy Policy for Europe' communication, which was adopted by the Council and the European Parliament (European Commission 2007). Subsequently, article 194 of the Lisbon Treaty included energy policy among the primary issues, mainly because of the liberalisation agenda that occurred within the Community. This evolution improved the EU's international leadership position in energy and environmental issues (Oberthür and Roche Kelly 2008; Van Schaik and Schunz 2012)

After Eurozone's economic crisis in 2009, the Jean Claude Juncker Commission set EU's energy strategy as a key priority, aimed at establishing an Energy Union that offers consumers secure and sustainable energy. As a result, the European Commission issued the energy union strategy on 25 February 2015 (European Commission 2015) and thereafter, monitored its proper implementation and member states' issuance of related progress reports. However, many energy policy issues remained at the national level, as the Europeanisation process in energy policy requires the involvement of and close cooperation between member states. Recently, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's political programme seriously considered energy policy and climate change adaptation, declaring an aim to transform Europe into 'the first climate-neutral continent' through the recently announced European Green Deal. For that purpose, it is important to provide the conditions to achieve a 'just transition for all' that will contribute to social cohesion, long-term growth, and sustainability (von der Leyen 2019, p. 5-6). With regards to adopting climate change actions, Europe recognises several urgent challenges: the average air temperature is globally increasing, while the climate changes annually; 10 to 15 per cent of the Earth's species are already at risk of being extinct; nature and oceans are being contaminated and destroyed; and sea levels are expected to rise, causing more floods and potentially bringing serious unforeseen problems in several geographical areas.

Following this, the European Commission (2019c) acknowledged that the challenges are 'complex and interlinked', suggested that any policy recommendations and decisions should be 'bold and comprehensive and seek to maximize benefits for health, quality of life, resilience and competitiveness'; and highlighted the need for 'intense coordination to exploit the available synergies across all policy areas'. The EU declared that they would like to have 'a clean energy transition', which can further support the aims announced in the Paris Agreement (European Commission 2019d). In order to meet the agreed targets for 2030, the EU's objectives are to (1) reduce Green House Gas (GHG) emissions by a minimum of 40 per cent (the GHG reduction target for 2030 has been already revised by the European Commission and the Council where documents now state "at least 55%", and the Council has adopted this target too (see also European Climate Law and the 2030 Climate Target Plan, currently under discussion, which will codify the 2030 target into law), (2) increase the Renewable Energy Sources (RES) quota to a minimum of 32 per cent EU energy use, (3) increase energy efficiency by a minimum of 32.5 per cent, (4) guarantee a minimum of 15 per cent electricity inter-connection levels among neighbouring member states, and (5) support Research and Innovation (R&I) initiatives through the available financing tools.

In order to reach the recently declared European Union's energy and climate targets until the year 2030, it has been decided that all European Union countries have to design and set up a ten-year integrated NECPs that will be implemented during the period 2021 until 2030. In these NECPs, each European Union Member State needs to analyse, design, propose and implement the way that it will deal with the concepts as greenhouse gas emissions reductions, renewables, energy efficiency, interconnections, research and innovation. To provide further support for achieving the EU targets, each member state must initially send their NECP, which discloses their process and actions for meeting national

targets within 10 years (connected to the Energy Union's five key characteristics), current energy systems, and prevailing policies (European Commission 2019d). To achieve a 'sustainable low-carbon economy', the European Commission predicted that public and private investment changes are needed, in addition to any incentives across the entire policy range (European Commission 2019d). Member state governments had to prepare and provide their final NECPs, which considered the 2030 milestone, by the end of 2019, and weigh the Commission's evaluation and suggestions. They also had to submit biannual progress reports, under the European Commission's supervision, to ensure prompt and successful responses, as well as member states' alignment with the set targets.

To ensure that the member states received proper detailed guidelines and support, in June 2019, the European Commission (2019a, 2019b, 2019e) published a communication that included 28 draft NECPs, special recommendations, and comprehensive 'Staff Working Documents' (SWD) for each member state. During NECP preparations, each member state should publicly consult county authorities in a well-structured and official way to ensure that the community has enough time to seek information, study, and provide the required feedback. In the next milestone, set for October 2021, the European Commission has scheduled to assess member states' progress, which should take place every two years, regarding their NECPs' implementation status. The latter includes their progress in achieving the targets, updates on policies and measures, and updated projections for the future.

4. Member State's Responses and Compliance with the New Framework

International energy collaborations seem to be more effective at the level of international governance, rather than within the internal dimensions of domestic policy coordination (Lesage et al. 2010). Practically, this means that there are several possible response and compliance perceptions. On the one hand, the availability and even abundance of energy supply urged most member states to consider energy security issues as low priority (Szulecki and Westphal 2014). Accordingly, the foreign-policy dimensions of energy security remained a second priority compared to the EU's prominent climate change policies (Youngs 2009). Member states were criticised for not understanding that dealing with climate change requires more dedicated and geo-strategic foreign policies, and not only internal energy targets (Pascual and Zambetakis 2010). At the same time, several diplomats and politicians raised some concerns with regards to the EU's emphasis on climate change issues, which subsequently affected its overall energy policy (Youngs 2009). Member states responded differently to the integration process, due to their internal structural parameters as well as their perceptions of the decision-makers as either a strength or risk for their own countries (Mišík 2019). Depending on this perception, member states can either support EU integration and adopt common policies in their national legislation or oppose, delay, and even reject this process.

Evaluation of the assessment report

Based on the EU Assessment Report on NECPs, which the European Commission recently published, all member states have submitted their final NECP plans, after the initial schedule and time line delays, and the lengthy discussions at the national level that involved local stakeholders and concerned groups (European Commission 2020). Such a process is expected to enhance the finally approved NECPs' public acceptance, making implementation easier and more efficient. The following bullet points offer a concise summary for each of the aforementioned NECP parameters and Table 1 summarises the key points of the assessment report. Based on the data and information contained in each Commission Staff Working Document (SWD) of the final NECP for each member country, we evaluate the data presenting at the same time the results. The creation and use of figures below were deemed appropriate as they can always offer in a simple and concise way the conclusions of the evaluation of the final NECPs.

Table 1. Summary of the assessment report on NECPs.

Parameters	EU Assessment	2050 Targets	Scale
GHG emissions	Several countries placed aspiring objectives in areas not included in the EU's emission trading system. Other countries foresaw that the national targets can further reduce GHG emissions more than their Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR) binding targets.	National targets are within the 0-40 per cent range until 2030 vs. 2005 to meet the EU's requirements. Minimum reductions in areas which are not included in the EU's emission trading system.	B
Renewable energy	RES amounts in the EU's total energy mix could meet the 33.1 to 33.7 per cent levels by 2030.	Minimum 32 per cent until 2030.	AA
Energy efficiency	A 29.7 per cent [1176 Mtoe] reduction in primary energy and 29.4 per cent in final energy consumption [885 Mtoe] until 2030.	Difference between the target, equalling to 2.8% primary energy consumption, and the 3.1 per cent final energy consumption.	C
Energy security	Malta, Portugal Luxembourg, France, and Lithuania submitted their targets (internal). Bulgaria, Italy, Estonia, Germany, Poland, Croatia, and Ireland scheduled more Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) capacities to secure gas market supply and/or increase competition (external).	COVID-19 has also affected energy security. More focus is required on the resilience of clean technology supply chains. The design and implementation of important clean technology procurement and logistics requires recovery and resilience plans.	B/C
Internal energy market	Some member states submitted suggestions and prioritised energy subsidies in their NECPs: 19 countries included content on fossil fuel subsidies, 12 set action plans to eliminate fossil fuels, and six reported a time line to end part of the fossil fuel incentives.	Even if countries adopt separate processes for integration, the EU strategy provides an action plan to adjust energy markets to climate neutrality needs and could be seen as a driver for implementing more resilient energy systems.	B/C

Research & Innovation (R&I)	Little focus on R&I requirements for reaching climate and energy targets. National budgets dedicated to R&I in clean energy technologies are smaller compared to previous years. The national targets, with specific and clear 2030 and 2050 directions, are missing. In most cases, the NECP reports only financially support existing non-energy specific programmes.	A fresh strategic intention for clean energy R&I and rivalry is required to support European economies and assist innovation. This could help economies include innovation and new technologies. For both the EU and national R&I policies, local industrial policies should effectively fit the energy and climate targets.	C
Scale: AA: Excellent; A: Very Good; B: Good; C: Below Target; D: Failure.			

Source: The assessment is based on the European Commission (2020a).

After the recent SWD publications on 14 October 2020, the European Commission issued recommendations for each member state and a detailed account of how the previous recommendations were reflected in the final NECPs. The UK is not included, because Brexit is still undergoing negotiations.

Table 2. Overall assessment: EU member states' final NECPs.

	Largely Addressed	Partially Addressed
Austria	√	
Belgium		√
Bulgaria		√
Croatia		√
Cyprus	√	
Czech Republic		√
Denmark		√
Estonia		√
Finland		√
France	√	
Germany	√	
Greece		√
Hungary		√
Italy	√	
Ireland	√	
Latvia		√
Lithuania	√	
Luxembourg		√
Malta		√
Netherlands		√
Poland		√
Portugal	√	

Romania		√
Slovakia		√
Slovenia		√
Spain	√	
Sweden	√	
Total	**10**	**17**

Source: European Commission (2020a).

Figure 1 illustrates that 17 out of 27 countries partially addressed the recommendations and 10 largely addressed them. In the following figures, each of the NECP parameters represent the factors in the European Commission's final SWD.
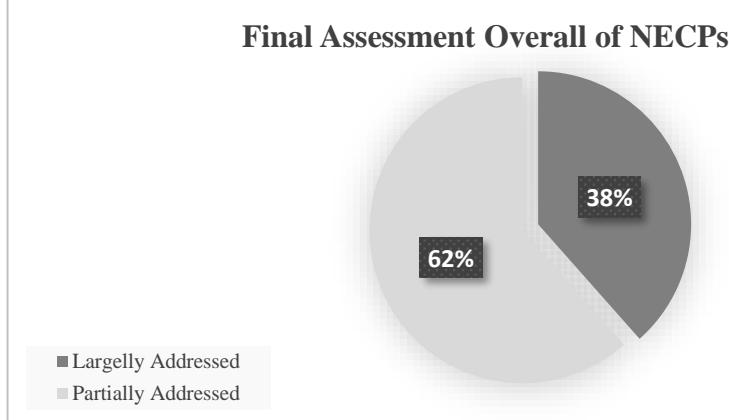
Figure 1. Final NECPs: Overall assessment.
Source: European Commission (2020a).

Figure 2 depicts the final NECPs' decarbonisation-GHG parameter. The 11 member states that considered this parameter as not applicable or relevant are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia and Spain. If we also consider that Denmark, Latvia, and Malta did not address this factor, 50 per cent of the countries ignored decarbonisation-GHG. In fact, only Germany fully addressed this recommendation in the final NECP.
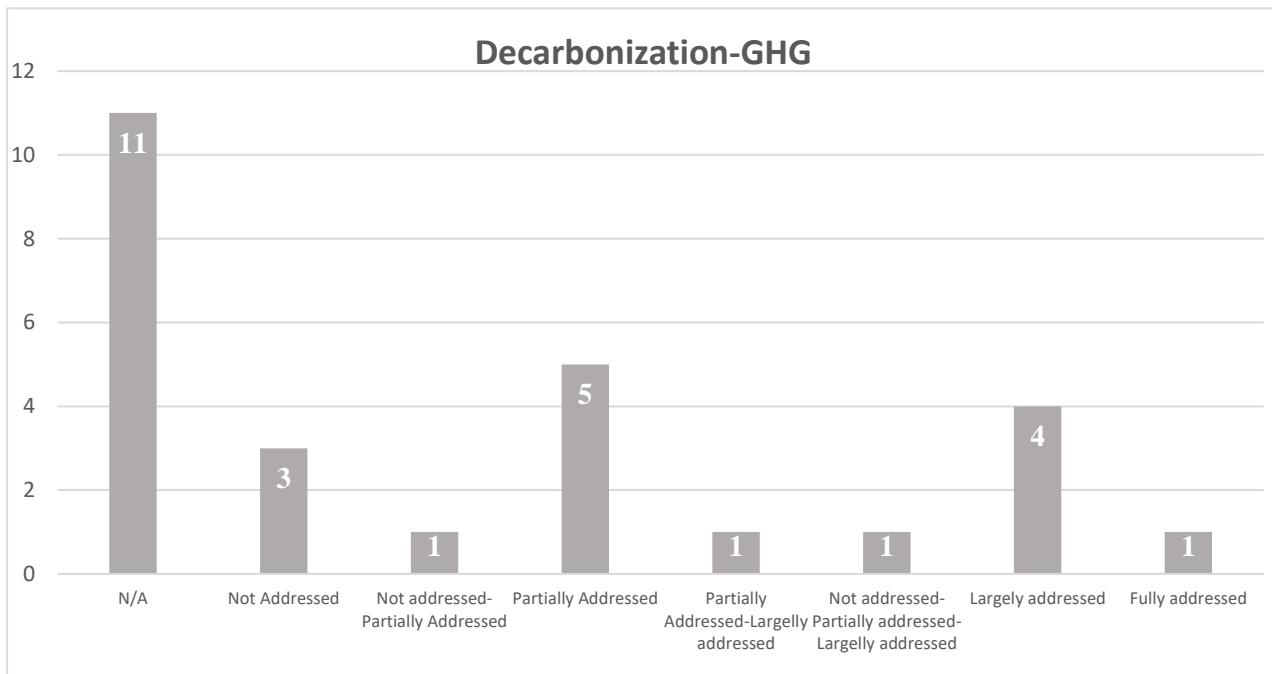
Figure 2. Final NECPs: GHG decarbonisation.
Source: European Commission (2020a).

Figure 3 reveals that nine member states (Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, Slovakia and Sweden) partially and fully addressed the recommendations regarding Decarbonisation-RES, seven countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Slovenia) partially and largely addressed them, and only Lithuania largely and fully addressed them.
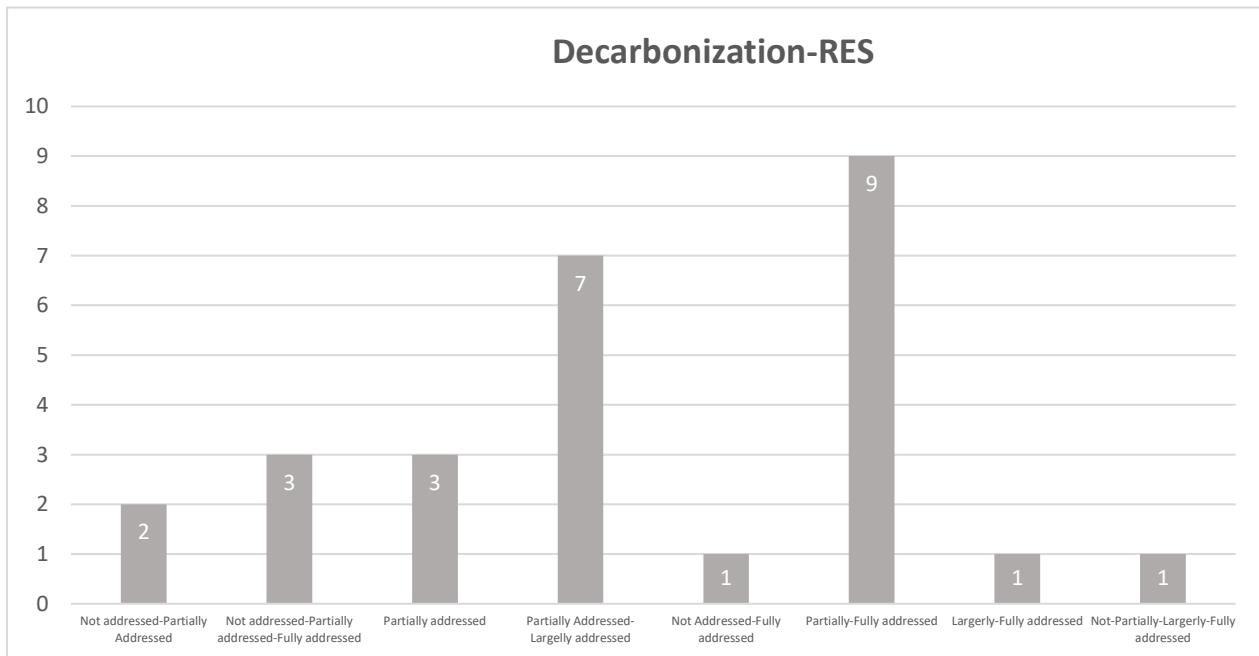
Figure 3. Final NECPs: RES decarbonisation.
Source: European Commission (2020a).

As seen in Figure 4, 10 out of 27 have not and only partially addressed the recommendations on energy efficiency in their NECPs, specifically Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria,

Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, and Luxembourg, while only Italy partially and fully addressed them.
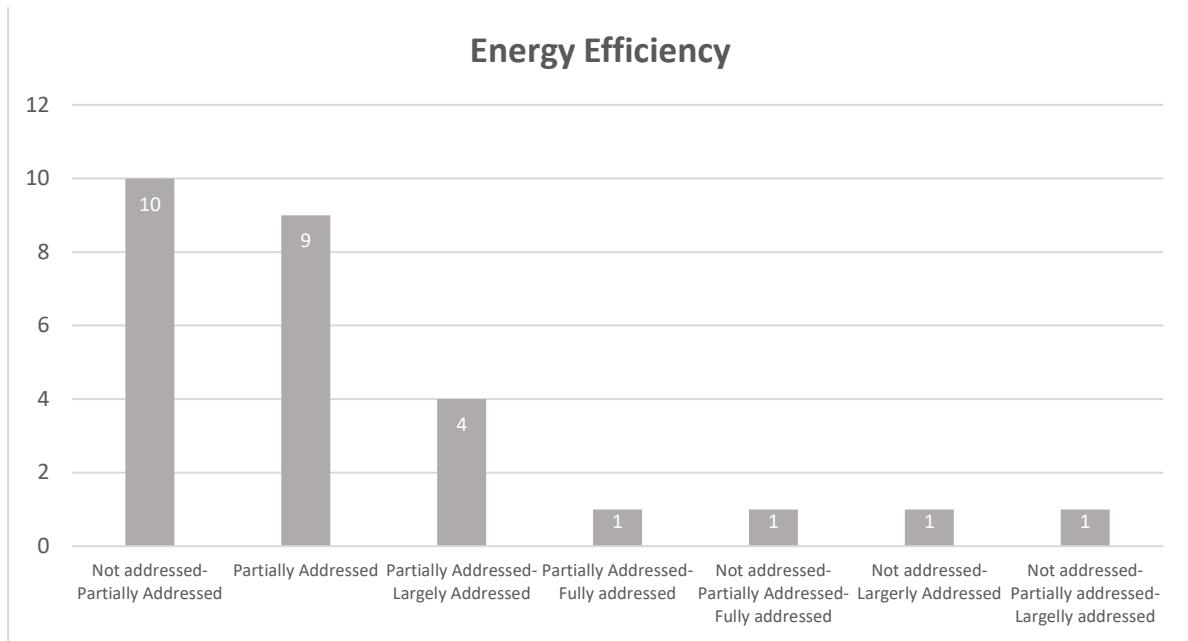
Figure 4. Final NECPs: Energy efficiency.
Source: European Commission (2020a).

Figure 5 shows that 10 out of 27 member states partially addressed the recommendations on energy security (Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Slovakia and the Netherlands), four did not consider them applicable or relevant (Croatia, Denmark, Luxembourg, and Portugal), and only Spain fully addressed them.
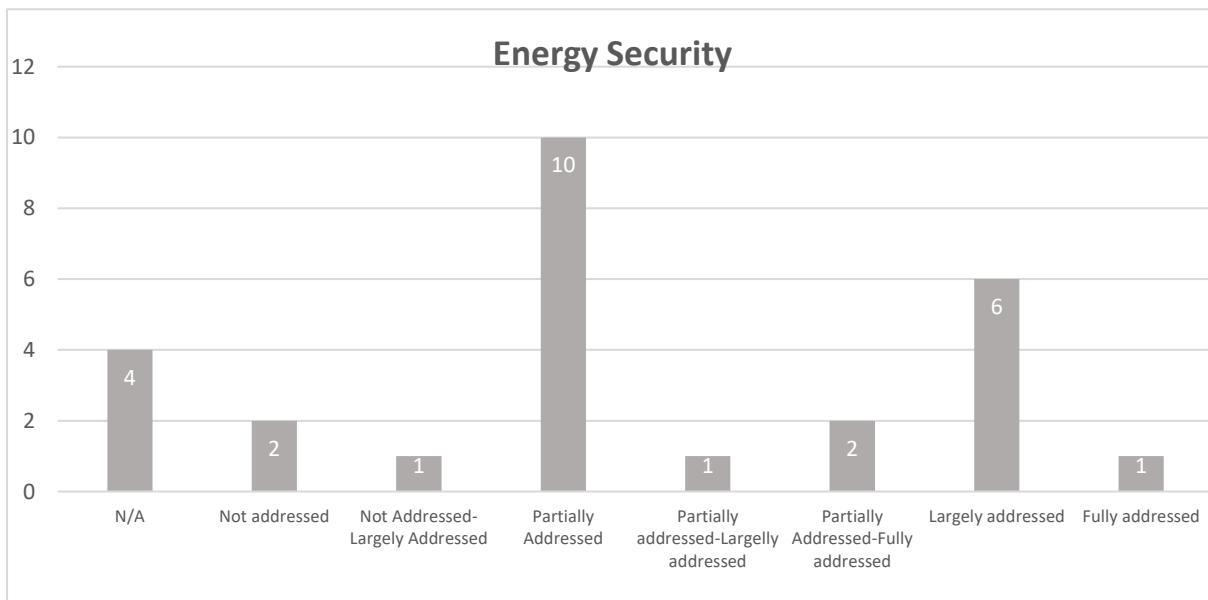
Figure 5. Assessment on the energy security parameter of the final NECPs.
Source: European Commission (2020a).

Figure 6 indicates that 13 out of 27 partially addressed the recommendations on internal energy markets in their NECPs: Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, France,

Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia. Additionally, Austria, Belgium, Finland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Sweden did not consider them applicable or relevant.
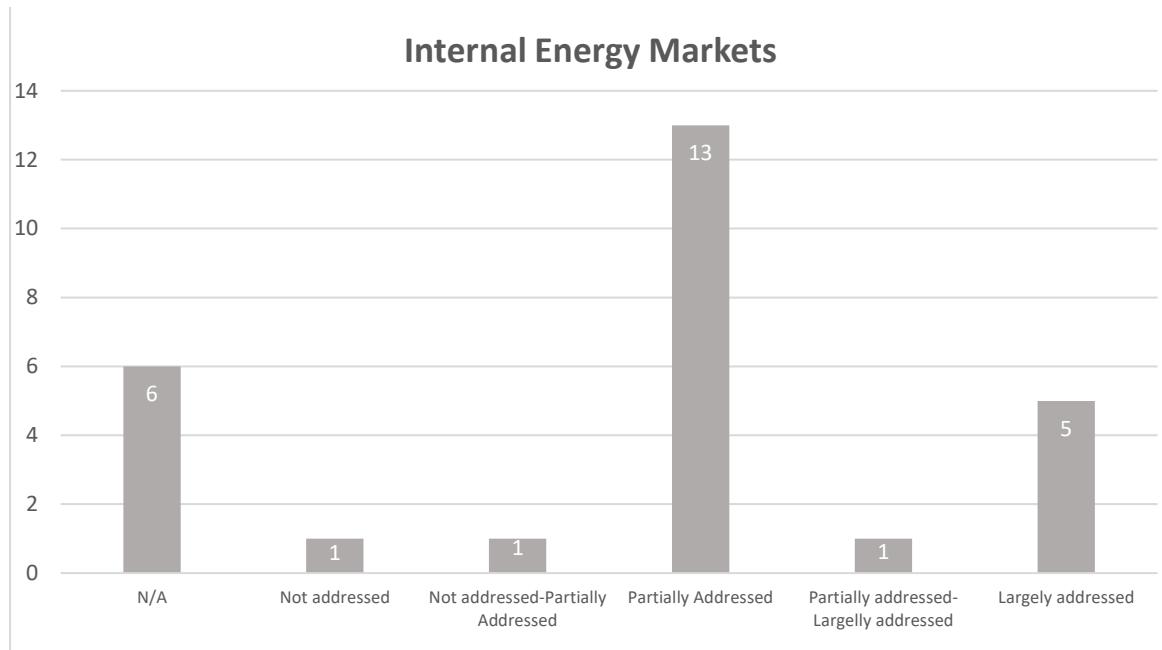
Figure 6. Final NECPs: Internal energy market.
Source: European Commission (2020a).

Finally, Figure 7 represents the R&I and Competitiveness parameter. Most member states (18 out of 27) partially addressed the recommendations. The countries that are excluded from this group are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania and Slovakia. However, the Netherlands in fact largely addressed the recommendations.
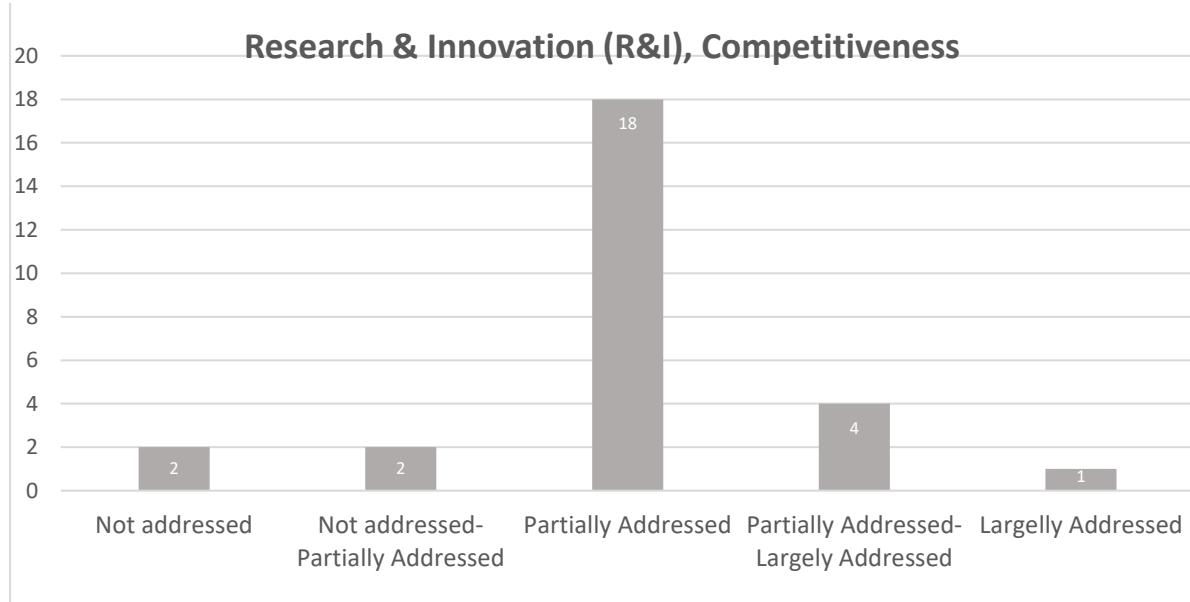
Figure 7. Final NECPs: R&I and Competitiveness.
Source: European Commission (2020a).

Table 3 below summarises the results of each member states' responses and compliance with the European Commission's directions and recommendations regarding energy

and climate. Based on the European Commission's assessment, each member state can be classified into one or two categories.

Table 3. EU member states' compliance based on their final NECPs.

Auditor	Categories				
EU Compliance	N/A	Not	Partially	Largely	Fully
EU Countries	Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands		Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia	Austria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Portugal, Spain, Sweden	

Member states' compliance and change

To assess each member state's level of compliance with the European Commission's directions and recommendations in their NECPs (see also, Torney and O'Gorman (2019)), Table 4 categorises the EU member states' energy and climate/environment strategies based on the EU's recommendations (European Commission 2020b). The table shows a considerable change in the categorisation of some member states: Greece, Portugal, and Spain were foot-dragging, but are fence-sitting in their final NECPs; Luxembourg was initially fence-sitting (Börzel 2002) but is now foot-dragging; and countries like France and Italy are pace-sitting, based on their NECP responses.

Table 4. EU member states' long-term strategies in energy and climate (environment).

Strategy	Foot-dragging	Fence-sitting	Pace-setting
Member State Compliance	Bulgaria, Croatia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland	Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain	Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden

According to this analysis, Figure 8 presents a map illustrating the member states' strategies in energy, climate, and environment policies. Initially, six countries were considered **pace-sitters**: Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, Sweden, and Finland (Börzel 2002). These countries had been industry leaders in Europe for a while because their governments had implemented environment, climate, and energy restrictions and regulations long ago. Generally, these countries are more likely to be aligned with high European standards, but the assessments on the Netherlands and Denmark revealed that their final NECPs only partially addressed the EU's directions, the 918 and 903 SWDs, respectively (European Commission 2020b).
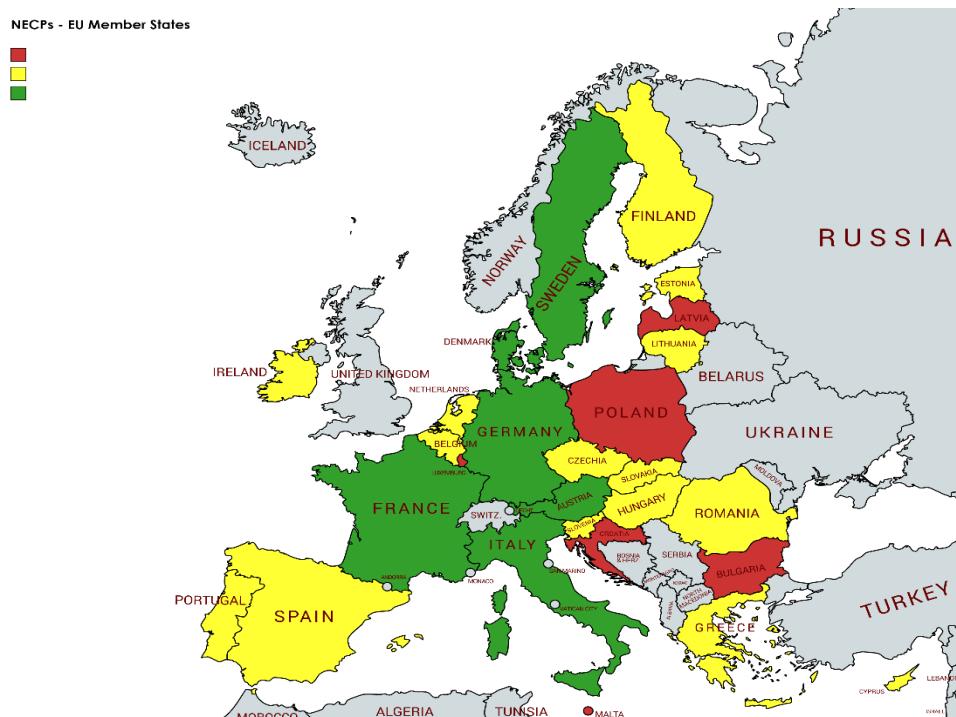
Figure 8. Energy and climate long-term strategies – member states
Source: Authors

Germany is considered one of the most influential countries within the EU, especially concerning energy related issues. Although it strongly supports initiatives and policies related to RES and climate change, Germany is slow to respond and support some areas, such as energy market liberalisation and achieving a consensus for European energy policy (Birchfield and Duffield 2011). Along with Germany, Sweden is a climate leader and prefers adopting an ambitious climate policy, which having a high GDP and EU membership can support (Tobin 2017). In addition, Denmark clarified that its NECP is a generic plan in which the criteria set by the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive do not apply (no. 903) (European Commission 2020b). The country has not addressed how it intends to reach its 2030 GHG emissions target, as recommended by the European Commission on 18 June 2019 (no. 903) (European Commission 2020b). At the same time, its planned policies and measures are not well described in most of the NECP parameters, despite the fact that after the last general election in 2019, the Social Democrats and their centre-left allies agreed to form a government that finally set on one of the most ambitious climate policies in the world. Nonetheless, after years of budget cuts under the previous Prime Minister Rasmussen, Mette Frederiksen became the country's youngest prime minister, and her administration's green agenda aimed to further support the North Sea offshore wind projects and establish artificial energy island(s). As Denmark has a high GDP, in addition to its EU membership, it is largely compliant with the European Commission's climate and energy directions for the 2030 and 2050 goals as set in the NECPs.

Italy and France have largely addressed the EU recommendations, as per the 911 and 909 SWDs (European Commission 2020b), respectively, and could be potentially or actively pace-setting member states, rather than fence-sitters. Italy's available administrative system to support and assist the country's efforts to comply with the European climate and energy policies appears to be less capable than required, mainly because it is complicated and bureaucratic, while also unequal across the spectrum of technology and its applications (Di Nucci and Russolillo 2017). France's situation is unique, as the country was following a 'state-centric' energy policy that must change to comply with the latest EU energy policy (Birchfield and Duffield, 2011). Although the country considers itself a special case and does not include fossil fuels in its energy mix, it finally expressed its desire and willingness to comply with the EU's energy policy, as also described in its latest

NECP, which the European Commission characterised as largely compliant and ready to contribute to emissions reduction.

On the other hand, countries seen as foot-draggers are industrial latecomers with less developed regulatory structures, such as Portugal, Greece, and Spain (Börzel 2002). Ireland has been trying to 'promote a green image' (fence-sitter), while Poland noted its opposition to 'the whole idea of a low-carbon economy' in 2014 when the European Commission designed its previous climate and energy package (Skjærseth 2014, p. 510). Both democratisation level and internal power separations in a member state play a significant role in the adoption of environmentally friendly policies that can eventually properly address climate change challenges and be applicable in a more efficient way. Countries like Bulgaria and Poland are categorised as semi-consolidated. Latvia became a democratic state only after independence in 1991, but corruption remains a major problem affecting politics and internal institutions. Countries like Malta and Croatia have a lower GDP than the average EU state, and this important factor can explain their behaviours towards adopting or refusing climate change actions.

The retail electricity prices among the European member states vary immensely, with Denmark's being three times more expensive that Bulgaria's (cheapest price). It is important to consider that the cheapest retail prices are in countries like Bulgaria, Croatia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Romania, and Hungary, who are also seen as foot dragging and have only partially addressed the recommendations regarding their internal markets (European Commission 2019e).

Countries that are characterised as **fence-sitting,** which falls between pace-setting and foot-dragging, are considered to hold a more neutral position and usually prefer to build coalitions with others on an ad-hoc basis (Börzel 2002). Such countries are Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Slovakia and Luxembourg. Ireland largely addressed the EU's directions as per the 911 and 906 SWDs (European Commission 2020b), and set a 2030 GHG emission target of -30 per cent compared to their 2005 levels, which was not covered in the EU Emissions Trading System. On the other hand, Italy either partially or largely addressed most of the parameters, except for R&I and competitiveness (no. 911).

At the same time, several countries' policies, identified in the final NECPs, are similar to objectives rather than clear actions (no. 906) (European Commission 2020b). For instance, the Netherlands' GHG emission reductions seem to focus on their existing policies and not on presenting a holistic blend of measures. Thus, the 2030 ESR target may not be possible to achieve (no. 918) (European Commission 2020b). At the same time, the Netherlands' NECP does not explain how the country can apply energy efficiency's first principle (no. 918) (European Commission 2020b). Despite their previous leadership in the design and implementation of complete and thorough environmental policies, the country is recently seen as a laggard, mostly interested in protecting the existing set ups and the needs of their internal industrial stakeholders, rather than complying with the European policies and regulations, especially in the RES (Hoppe and van Bueren 2017). In Finland, the need for immediate and accurate compliance with the European environmental and climate policies changed their usual procedure so dramatically that they had to consult with the internal interested stakeholders (Börzel 2007).

Although most parties within the political spectrum of a member state address climate change, the presence of a left-wing government increases the chances of obtaining positive decisions to adopt and follow more ambitious climate and energy policies (Tobin 2017). This happened in Portugal, where the Socialists have been in power since 2015, but in the last 2019 election, they obtained a minority government. Furthermore, Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, in addition to Malta and Cyprus, have shown a much higher degree of readiness and compliance, when compared to the previous accession of Southern countries (Greece, Spain, and Portugal). However, these CEE countries still do not have an adequate administration capacity, mainly due to drawbacks caused by corruption, authoritarianism, poor organisation, and small socio-economic growth. Compliance with the newly imposed EU rules is mostly related to a country's legal and administrative capacity. Another important factor is that the EU has intensified its support to build

member states' capacities for achieving compliance, mostly through various funding programmes' financial and technical assistance (Börzel and Buzogány 2019).

Furthermore, although CEE countries' performance and attitudes are not comparable to those of the Southern European countries, during the early stages of the EU's accession (i.e. Greece, Spain, and Portugal), they may still be reluctant to comply and adopt aspiring climate and energy policies. For example, several countries, such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, depend on coal for their energy and are, thus, reluctant to adopt and implement other energy sources, such as renewables (Skjærseth 2014). For this reason, these countries have partially addressed the recommendations for Decarbonisation-RES in their NECPs.

The Europeanisation process of Estonian foreign policy took place during the 1990s, made significant progress in EU cohesion policy in the 2000s, and successfully joined the EU in 2004. Afterwards, the country's externality efforts reduced and delays in the Europeanisation process emerged. Regarding environmental and climate aspects, Estonia reported an overall improving implementation trend in the annual distribution of environmental infringements during the last years, from 19 in 2008 to only 2 in 2015 (Melidis and Russel 2020). However, its NECP partially addressed the recommended targets (Raagmaa et al. 2014). Finally, with regards to Slovenia, after its accession to the EU and becoming a full member in 2004, the central government still plays the most critical role, while different stakeholders and local communities are more promising actors for political decentralisation, and assist in the country's compliance with EU rules and regulations (Lindstrom 2005).

5. Conclusions

The European Commission aims to achieve a climate neutral economy by 2050, with energy transformation playing the most critical role. To establish a well-defined framework that will contribute to this aim, member states have been asked to submit their final NECPs, in which they were required to set detailed national objectives, targets, and contributions, as well as policies and measures to achieve the objectives, especially the 2030 EU energy and climate targets. However, the COVID-19 crisis may have distracted these member states from the process of properly preparing, designing, and submitting their final NECPs. In other words, this unforeseen pandemic may have derailed member states from their initial focus and approach towards new priorities that require an immediate response. Using Börzel's (2002) categorisation for the member states it is observed that there is a significant variation in their strategies and compliance. Some member states that initially characterised as foot-dragging, such as Greece, Portugal, and Spain, can now be considered as fence-sitting, and others that were seen as fence-sitting, can now be perceived as either foot-dragging (e.g. Luxembourg) or pace-setting (e.g. France and Italy). Variation can be explained through various reasons domestic players; lacking capacities; populists' governments. There is a large and vivid discussion on these topics in energy and EU studies journals which would help formulating clear-cut expectations (see, Zapletalová and Komínková 2020). Europeanisation is a multi-faceted and dynamic process, which can be viewed with a top-down and/or bottom-up perspective, that continuously evolves during the long process of adopting a new legislation to a local legal system. Coherence and uniform responses are required in the final NECPs, but this process quite often encounters reactions, delays, partial acceptance, and ultimately, a controversial and incomplete implementation of measures. In the case of NECPs, member states have different reasons and causes that affected their responses and characterised them as either partially or largely addressing the required commitments in the European Commission's targets for achieving a climate neutral European economy by 2050.

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