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Gridlocked

Unleashing European Power

Abstract

For Europe to obtain energy independence, reliability and a successful transition away from fossil fuels, we need to future-proof the electric grid. There are many challenges to tackle, from a lack of public understanding to insufficient funding, and slow permitting times for electric line construction – both at local and EU level.

Reaching European energy and climate goals will not occur overnight. It requires relieving grid bottlenecks, maximising private investment, and accelerating Europe’s clean energy transition. Innovative solutions including smart grids, accelerated permitting, flexibility markets, and enhanced interconnectors offer concrete liberal pathways to modernise the grid and to unlock Europe's full potential.

Eloi Borgne
Junior Policy and Research Officer at European Liberal Forum

Introduction

On Monday, 28 April 2025, Spain and Portugal experienced a widespread blackout affecting 55 million people for over 12 hours. This raised immediate questions about grid resilience in a situation of high renewable energy penetration in the Spanish grid (approximately 80 per cent at the time) (Jones, 2025). While initial speculation linked the outage to the intermittent nature of wind and solar power, expert analysis and the official Spanish government report dismissed this assessment, instead attributing the failure to critical infrastructure vulnerabilities and insufficient voltage control capacity.

Specifically, the report states that the outage was triggered by an overvoltage problem with a multifactorial origin: a sequence of atypical fluctuations destabilised the system, a situation exacerbated by the inadequate response of certain generation facilities that had been programmed to manage voltage (Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico, 2025a). Some plants disconnected prematurely, while others contributed to the overvoltage by supplying reactive power (a type of electricity not used for utilities but essential for maintaining voltage stability in grids), rather than absorbing it (Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico, 2025b). This cascading failure ultimately led to loss of synchronism with France and a complete grid collapse across mainland Spain.

The outage demonstrates the pressing need for greater investment in modernising grid infrastructure, improving voltage control resources, expanding storage, and enhancing cross-border interconnections. According to Renew MEP Anna Stürgkh.

> The Iberian blackout was a painful demonstration of how vulnerable our grids remain. It was a reminder that Europe's energy transition will fail unless we invest just as strategically in infrastructure as in renewables. The blackout did not prove the failure of the Energy Union – quite the opposite. Thanks to cross-border interconnectors, France was able to step in immediately. Now the Commission must act decisively to prioritise planning and coordination on grids and storage – or we will keep lurching from one crisis to the next. (European Parliament, 2025a).

If electricity is the lifeblood of the European continent, powering its every move, then the grid is the network of veins that ensures its vital flow. In the coming years, Europe's electricity networks will face growing congestion as renewables, electric vehicle (EV) charging, and decentralised loads outpace grid upgrades. Traditional permit and construction timelines (five to fifteen years for new lines) lag far behind the one- to five-year rollout of renewables and the under two-year deployment of EV chargers (IEA, 2023b). Such challenges are particularly evident in the Netherlands, where the replacement of coal with solar energy has happened faster than elsewhere in Europe, meaning that grid congestion issues have also risen much faster there than in any other country in the union.

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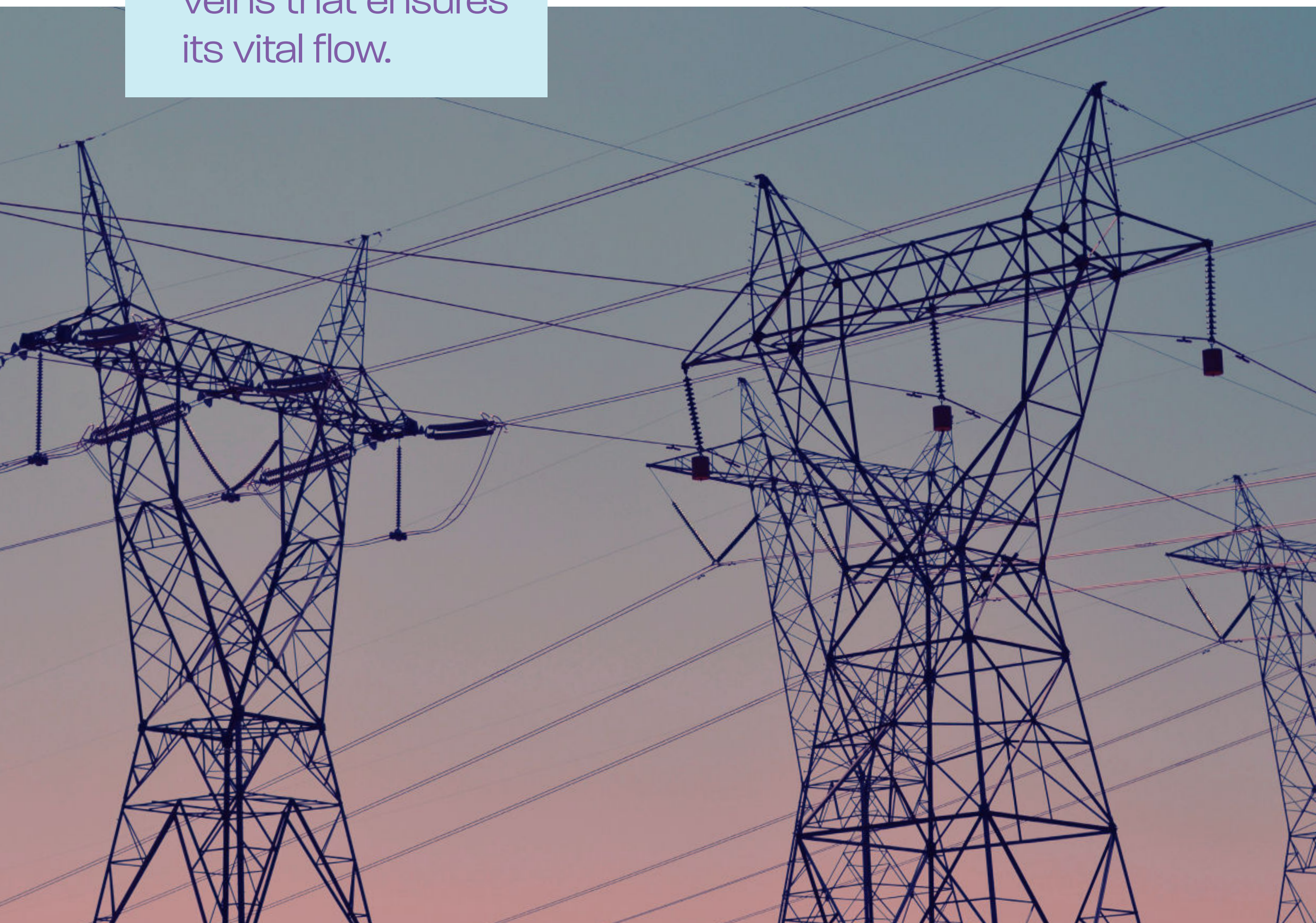
If the potential for blackouts has to be addressed, so too does energy competition. As European consumer and industry stakeholders recognise, to compete successfully with China and the US in areas such as manufacturing, and to maintain and expand Europe's industrial base – the provision of cheap energy has to be the number one target. And to achieve lower electricity prices in both the short and long term, energy grids are crucial to decrease the price of electricity and allow for a more rapid transition to occur.



Reasons for congestion in a rapidly decarbonising Europe

As the backbone of the electricity supply system, grids are under-discussed and suffer from under-investment. As the International Energy Agency (IEA) states, 'while renewables deployment has accelerated at an unprecedented rate, grid investment has not kept pace' (IEA, 2025). This can lead to significant issues, as a lack of societal support can greatly extend project timelines. Problems include the failure among political parties and interest groups to agree on long-term objectives and a strategic vision for energy infrastructure. Additionally, changes in government can further delay or stop project development.

During a European parliamentary debate on grids, MEP Anna Stürgkh stated:

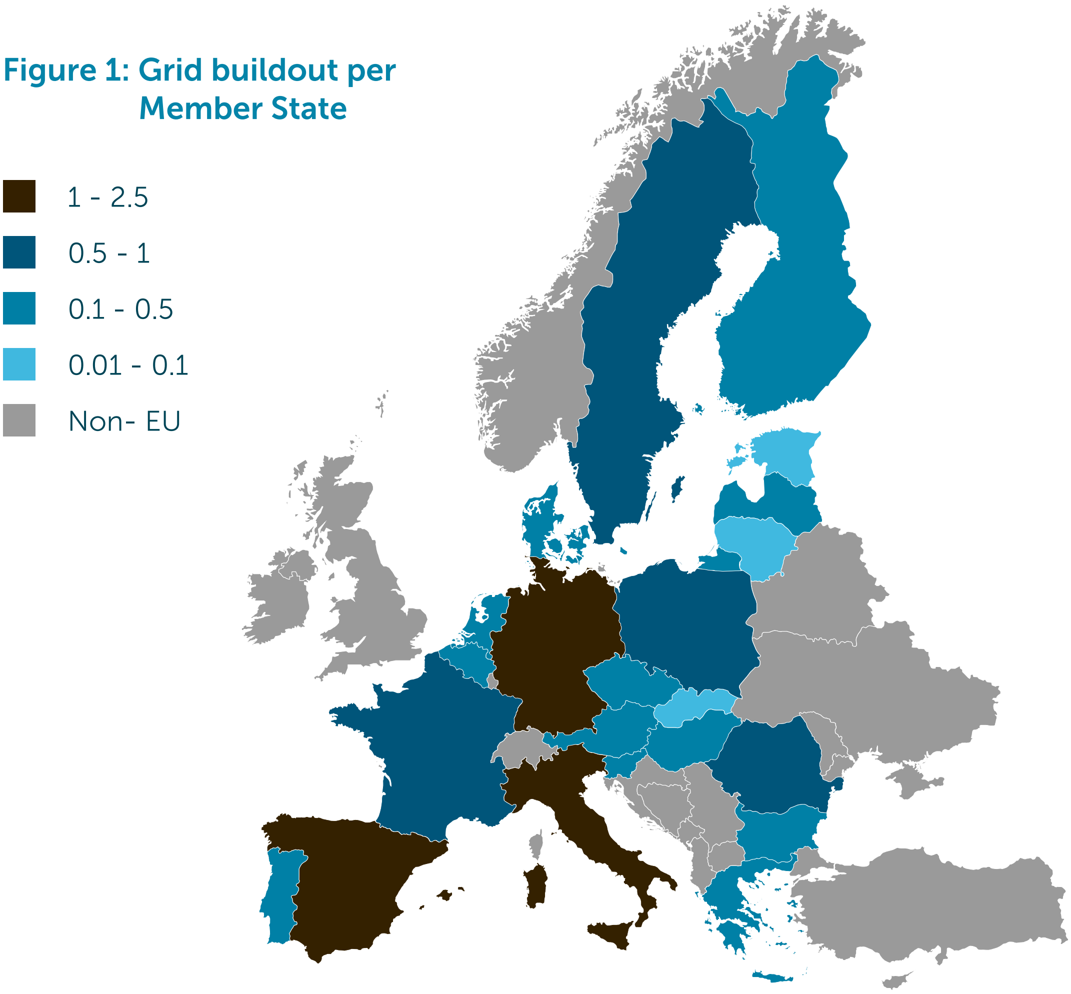
> "The reasons for the need to modernise and expand our electricity grids are pretty straightforward. The ongoing electrification of our industry, our heating, our mobility is putting pressure on the existing systems. The intent to make sure that this electrification is sustained by clean energy sources, and the fact that soon about 70% of renewables will be connected directly to the distribution grid, demands our existing grid to adapt. But even without these developments, there is need for action. Considering that around 40% of distribution grids are now over 40 years old". (European Parliament, 2025b).

Yet there is a lack of political, and public will to act on the issue of grids. Problems associated with grid congestion are not very exciting and resolving them requires huge amounts of time and money. However, bottlenecks are increasing, renewables in Northern Europe cannot always reach demand centres, and EV clusters stress distribution networks. Then there is the additional issue of climate change-related impacts on the grid. In order to survive increasingly frequent climate change impacts, such as extreme weather events, significantly more resilient systems will be needed in the near future.

Another setback for electric grid development in Europe is regulatory drag: applying for grid infrastructure permits can take up to ten years for medium- and high-voltage networks (DSO Entity, 2025). Delays can arise from complexities in the permitting process. These include overburdened staff at permitting agencies, flawed review processes among government agencies, officials' subjective interpretations or insufficient review of regulations by officials, complex land use change requirements, and estimation errors. In Europe, over a quarter of electricity projects of common interest (PCIs) face delays, primarily due to problems over the granting of permits (ACER, 2024).

Finally, grids suffer from under-utilised flexibility: distributed resources (batteries, demand response, and EVs) have huge untapped potential to relieve stress in real time. Current distribution grids (the final stage in the delivery of electricity) are not equipped to handle future needs, such as distributed generation and flexibility resources. (Distributed generation is electricity produced close to where it is used – such as from rooftop solar panels or local wind turbines – while flexibility resources include technologies and strategies such as battery storage, demand response, and smart grid systems that help balance supply and demand in real time.) To maximise the use of these resources, transmission and distribution planning must be more coordinated and neutral in terms of technology. Distributed energy resources, such as storage, microgrids, and non-wire options, can provide flexibility solutions that serve as alternatives to costly and complex network reinforcements, thus positively increasing affordability and sustainability.

Figure 1: Grid buildout per Member State



Source: European Parliamentary Research Service (2025).

As can be seen in Figure 1, transmission lines are not evenly distributed among EU Member States. Countries such as Germany have longer transmission lines, due in part to a larger population size, but also owing to innovative ideas, such as the designation of 'acceleration areas' where projects can be approved through a simplified and expedited procedure (McGovan, 2024).

Innovative solutions

Smart grids and digitalisation

Many solutions have been put forward to lessen congestion on the grid. One of the most innovative ideas is to use smart meters to balance out the grid. These meters can provide real-time data on energy consumption, allowing for more efficient management of electricity distribution. By monitoring usage patterns, smart meters enable utilities to predict demand and adjust supply accordingly, reducing strain on the grid. Smart meters can also facilitate demand response programmes, where consumers are incentivised to reduce or shift their energy usage during peak times. *Mandating smart meter rollouts* by 2027 could be an effective way of reducing grid congestion (ENTSO-E et al., 2025).

Another key solution is establishing robust data-sharing platforms. Digital infrastructures can enable the secure exchange of energy-related data among key stakeholders. We recommend the creation of an EU 'Energy Data Space' to actively facilitate real-time grid and consumption data exchange between Transmission and Distribution System Operators (TSOs/DSOs) and third-party aggregators, while rigorously safeguarding privacy. The focus must be on grid companies streamlining and ensuring transparency in data collection and storage. Yet such measures need clear definition and targeting to avoid the risk of data collection inefficiency and problems with effective data scaling and sharing.

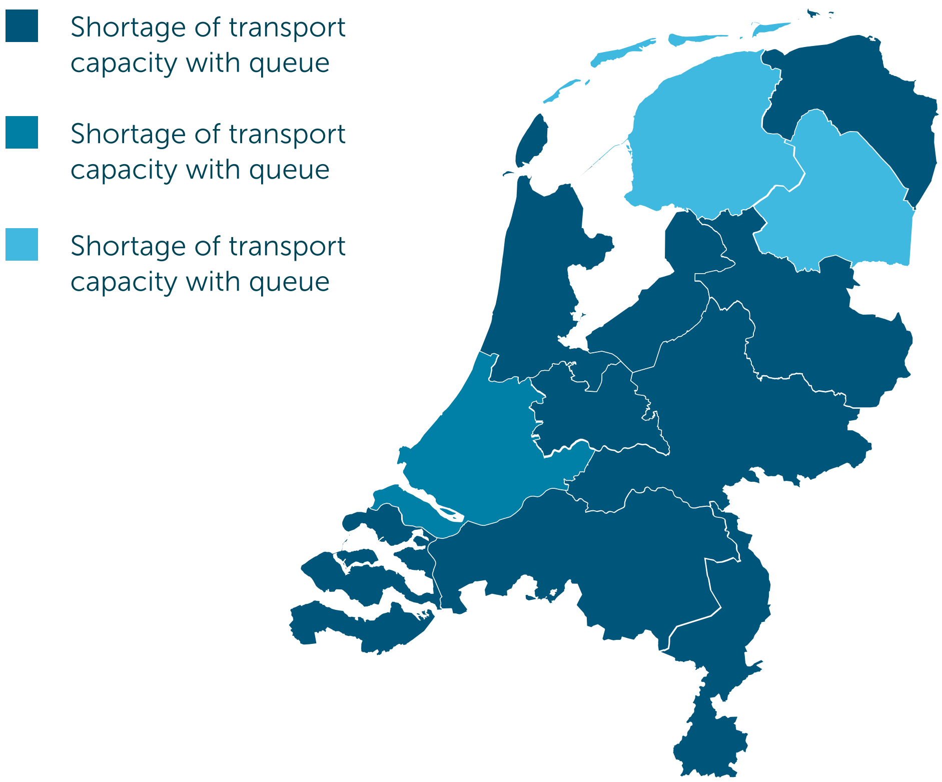
EU-level permitting reform

Power grid project development typically goes through three phases: scoping, permitting, and construction. Permitting was discussed with the Dutch Ministry for Climate and Green Growth and was highlighted as one of the crucial points impeding grid development. In the policy letter titled 'Sneller uitbreiden van het elektriciteitsnet' ('Faster expansion of the electricity grid'), addressed to the Tweede Kamer (the Netherlands' House of Representatives), the Dutch Minister of Climate and Green Growth Sophie Hermans stated: 'The lead time for high-voltage projects is currently on average 8 to 10 years. That is too long to meet the growing demand for transmission capacity in time. We are therefore aiming to halve the lead time' (Hermans, 2025).

A solution for reducing delay could be to set *a cap on permitting times* for all new transmission and distribution projects, enforced through an EU 'one-stop shop' under the TEN-E (Trans-European Networks for Energy) framework. The TEN-E framework supports cross-border energy infrastructure, and under this system, a proposed solution to reduce delays is to impose a strict time limit on permitting processes for all new transmission and distribution projects.

Linked to this is a need to simplify appeals during the permitting process. Establishing a *fast-track route for grid projects* of 'European significance', enabling appeals to be resolved within six months, would allow for greater grid development and therefore less congestion.

Figure 2: Netherlands regional grid operator map



Source: Netbeheer Nederland (2025).

Figure 2 shows the regions experiencing significant capacity shortages and queues for new demand or generation in the Netherlands, indicating where the grid is under the most strain. This highlights the need for streamlining permitting processes and faster project development. By reducing the lead time for high-voltage projects, as proposed by the Dutch Minister of Climate and Green Growth, and implementing an EU-level 'one-stop shop' for permitting, we can alleviate these bottlenecks can be avoided. The IEA further delves into the relationship between grids and renewables, citing lack of coordination between grid and renewable energy spatial planning as a key permitting challenge in EU Member States.

The Netherlands is taking concrete steps to address the strain, as the Minister of Climate and Green Growth, Sophie Hermans explains to the ELF:

> "We simply cannot afford to let businesses grind to a halt or leave homes without power due to an overloaded electricity grid. Tackling grid congestion is not a choice, it is a necessity. We must invest faster, plan smarter, and make room for innovative solutions. Because this isn't just about economic growth, it's also about supply security and the safety of our energy system. That's the only way to keep the Netherlands running and ready for the future. As Minister, I'm accelerating grid investments, cutting through unnecessary red tape, and working closely with grid operators, provinces and businesses to deliver the capacity we urgently need."

Increasing flexibility

Flexibility to adapt to changes in supply and demand is crucial for maintaining grid stability and reliability. One way to increase flexibility is by requiring DSOs to tender local congestion-relief services annually; these would be open to batteries, EV-to-grid, demand response, and microgrids. By mandating open, competitive procurement for these services, DSOs can address congestion without costly infrastructure upgrades.

As highlighted in a relevant BBC article, this approach is already in evidence in the UK: local flexibility platforms have enabled communities to sell electricity locally, reduce stress on the national grid, and cut consumer costs (National Grid, 2024). This model shows that leveraging distributed energy resources through structured local markets is not only technically feasible but also delivers measurable economic benefits and improvements to the grid (Rowlatt, 2025b).

Another example from the UK illustrates a problem to be avoided. In the first two months of 2025 the UK National Grid spent £253 million in the first two months of 2025, on managing grid congestion, paying wind farms to curtail production by shutting down over a 30-minute period and engaging gas plants to ramp up instead (Rowlatt, 2025a). Such interventions are loaded onto consumer bills and stem largely from the misalignment between rapid renewables deployment and outdated grid infrastructure. Experts and industry advocates are now calling for regional pricing models and better locational signals to ensure that cheap renewable energy serves demand rather than being wasted, as was the case in the UK.

Another possible solution to avoid congestion is to mandate dynamic pricing for residential and commercial consumers, thus shifting load away from congested hours and promote more efficient energy use. The application of time-of-use tariff use of appliances or EV charging could be encouraged during lower congestion hours. However, the drawback with this solution is that it requires smart meters.

The EU and its Member States should also aim to increase the use of green bonds, which are used to finance projects that contribute to environmental sustainability, including those related to grid infrastructure, flexibility, and digital projects. Some European utilities already issue green bonds to fund renewable energy projects and grid enhancements (European Union, 2023).

Cross-border interconnectors and regional hubs

Cross-border interconnections offer numerous benefits such as enhanced energy security, increased integration of renewable energy sources, and improved efficiency. By connecting power systems across borders, a larger range of generation capacity can be utilised to meet demand, reducing dependence on specific generators and allowing for shared reserves. This boosts the resilience of the broader system.

The synchronous grid of continental Europe, the world's largest, operates as a unified system at a frequency of 50 Hz, supported by flexible high voltage direct current links. This grid supplies electricity to over 500 million customers across 27 countries, including most of the European Union, under the Synchronous Area Framework Agreement (ENTSO-E, n.d.). The interconnected grid ensures efficient and reliable power transmission throughout the region. (The outage in Spain would have created fewer problems had there been more grid interconnections with other Member States – France in particular.) By fostering cross-border energy trade and collaboration, these interconnectors significantly enhance market integration. According to the Ten-Year Development Plan 2022 issued by ENTSO-E, more than 40 new interconnections are either under development or are planned for completion by 2030 (ENTSO-E, 2022).

However, cross-border interconnection is seen in the Netherlands, and in other Member States, as politically contentious. Dutch policy discussions often use the interconnection with Germany as a scapegoat for high energy prices, ignoring the clear positive aspects of interconnection (ENTSO-E, 2022).

Larger interconnected systems can integrate greater volumes of renewable energy, the supply of which can vary according to weather conditions. Such integration also creates an expanded customer base, attracting investors and promoting the adoption of renewables. In Europe, the cross-border electricity trade has been estimated to deliver significant welfare benefits (such as lower electricity prices, increased energy security, and a cleaner environment), including 34 billion in 2021 alone (ACER, 2022; IEA, 2023a).

A possible means of further boosting support for grids would be to fast-track 'priority corridors' identified in ENTSO-E's Ten-Year Development Plan by granting the commissioner sign-off on final financing within 12 months (ENTSO-E, 2025). Moreover, the aim of future policies should be to encourage public–private partnerships to co-finance interconnectors via an EU project bond programme.

In this regard, Renew has released a position paper on the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework, stating: 'The EU budget must fund what national budgets have no natural incentive to [fund], such as distribution and transmission electricity grids connecting European countries through a new and improved "Connecting Europe Facility for Energy" funding instrument' (Rolland-Calligaro, 2025). Such a facility would create a level playing field, ensuring that all Member States, regardless of national wealth or domestic energy priorities, contribute to and benefit from the backbone infrastructure needed for a functional European Energy Union.

To ensure that the benefits of the energy transition are shared fairly across the continent, energy and climate-related infrastructure must be placed at the heart of the EU's renewed cohesion strategy, as argued in a forthcoming ELF publication on cohesion policy. Cohesion strategy and policy refer to the EU's approach to reducing disparities between regions by promoting balanced economic, social, and territorial development. Targeted investment is essential for narrowing regional disparities in access to clean, affordable energy. Cohesion policy also has a critical role to play in supporting the diverse energy mixes of Member States.

In countries where nuclear energy remains a significant part of the energy system, cohesion funds can be directed towards the safe modernisation and robust regulation of nuclear facilities, ensuring that these assets contribute reliably to the continent's decarbonisation and energy security goals. For Member States without domestic nuclear capacity, enhanced cross-border grid infrastructure is vital. By strengthening interconnections with nuclear powerhouses elsewhere in Europe, these countries can access stable, low-carbon electricity imports, helping to offset the intermittency of renewables and mitigate risks of supply disruptions.

Ultimately, embedding energy infrastructure investment within the EU's cohesion policy framework will be key to reducing regional disparities, fostering economic convergence, and ensuring that all Europeans benefit from a secure, resilient, and decarbonised energy system.

Energy communities

Energy communities can contribute to managing grid congestion, promote sustainability, and lead to cost savings for participants. These are communities where residents or businesses share locally generated energy, for example from solar panels or wind turbines. This local approach is a strong embodiment of liberal values: it empowers citizens to take ownership of the energy transition, fostering local initiative, innovation, and greater choice. By enabling individuals and businesses to collaborate in producing, storing, and managing clean energy, these communities drive bottom-up solutions to grid congestion while increasing public support for sustainable technologies.

There are, however, certain challenges in setting up energy communities. Implementing and managing the technical aspects of energy communities, such as integrating renewable energy sources and ensuring grid stability, requires specialised knowledge and expertise. Such obstacles can be partly avoided by early-stage planning, especially in newly built urban developments. Given the current housing crisis, Europe will have to build more, and the creation of energy communities must be undertaken in conjunction with urban development, as this allows for smoother integration. In contrast, retrofitting existing infrastructure often faces community resistance, regulatory hurdles, and technical limitations, making it more difficult and time-consuming.

Under the Clean Energy for All Europeans package (specifically Directive (EU) 2019/944 (European Union, 2019) and the revised Renewable Energy Directive (2018/2001/EU)) (European Union, 2018), citizen and renewable energy communities are recognised as key players in the European energy ecosystem.

They can operate as any legal entity, support active consumer participation, and deliver flexibility services through demand response, storage, and local energy sales. By allowing the local generation and consumption of energy, these communities help to balance supply and demand more efficiently – reducing the strain on the main grid and alleviating congestion issues.

Conclusion

The urgency of Europe's grid challenge demands a decisive shift towards practical, market-driven solutions. Addressing bottlenecks requires a multi-pronged approach centred on accelerating deployment through decisive permitting reform, notably via an EU 'one-stop shop' to halve timelines for the creation of critical infrastructure. At the same time, the EU should unlock the vast potential of distributed flexibility by mandating DSO tenders for congestion relief, introducing dynamic pricing enabled by smart meters (at a European level), and establishing supportive frameworks for energy communities.

Crucially, enhancing cross-border interconnection reinforced by fast-tracked financing and public–private partnerships should be recognised not as a step towards vulnerability but as a fundamental strength, bringing security, renewables integration, and market efficiency. Embracing digitalisation through comprehensive smart meter rollouts and the creation of a secure EU Energy Data Space will deliver the real-time visibility and control necessary for a more responsive, intelligent grid.

By pairing digital innovation, permitting reform, and market-based flexibility, this liberal agenda will transform grid congestion from bottleneck into opportunity, unleashing billions in private capital, integrating more renewables, empowering consumers, and safeguarding Europe's path to a reliable, affordable, and zero-carbon electricity future.

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Author bio

Eloi Borgne is Junior Policy and Research Officer at ELF and specialises in Techno-Politics and Techno-Sustainability. Before joining ELF, he completed his Master's in Energy and Climate Law at the University of Groningen, and did internships at the International Energy Agency and at a consultancy.

About ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 56 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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