

Interview – Marco Siddi

Written by E-International Relations

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Marco Siddi is Leading Researcher at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs and Associate Professor in Political Science at the University of Cagliari, Italy. He is also Adjunct Professor in World Politics at the University of Helsinki and in International Relations at Tampere University. He is a Board Member of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) and a member of the European Leadership Network. He received his PhD at the Universities of Edinburgh and Cologne, in the framework of the Marie Curie Training Network EXACT concerning the external action of the European Union. His work focuses primarily on energy politics, the politics of memory and identity, European politics, and EU-Russia relations.

His latest monographs are *European Energy Politics: The Green Transition and EU-Russia Energy Relations* (Edward Elgar, 2023) and *European Identities and Foreign Policy Discourses on Russia: From the Ukraine to the Syrian Crisis* (Routledge, 2020). He has also co-edited the volume *Historical Memory and Foreign Policy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022). His research was published in top-ranked international academic journals, including the *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Geopolitics*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Journal of European Integration*, *The International Spectator*, *German Politics*, *Politics and Governance*, and *International Politics*. He has written policy analyses for several European think tanks, as well as for LSE EUROPP, OpenDemocracy, and the European Leadership Network.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

There are numerous interesting developments, it is even difficult to keep track and summarize. In energy and climate politics, the green transition has huge societal consequences that we are only beginning to explore. Concepts such as security, justice, and sustainability drive many debates, and it is more and more difficult to discuss them 'in isolation' because they are increasingly interrelated. In the discipline of International Relations more broadly, the ongoing shift of economic and political power from the Global North to the Global South, or at least to some countries in this second grouping, is perhaps the most relevant development. This shift should not be overstated or idealized, but it deserves critical attention.

Conversely, one of my main areas of interest and expertise—EU-Russia and West-Russia relations—has become very depressing to study. I do not mean that the topic has become uninteresting, it is just very hard to cope with the negative developments since 2022. On the other hand, there is a need for solid expertise to analyze the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and its numerous ramifications.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The most significant empirical development in my area of expertise was Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022. By saying this, I do not want to claim that this was a unique event, as many West-centric analysts have been claiming—there have been very destructive wars in other parts of the world, such as in Yemen and Gaza, with even more civilian casualties. I mean that the Russo-Ukrainian war has had the deepest impact on my area of expertise, EU-Russia relations and energy politics. It is also one of the main events—together with the growing US-China rivalry and geopolitical competition among major powers—that is causing a fundamental shift in thinking, at least in the

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West: from a liberal paradigm praising international free trade and interdependence to a more realist approach focusing on strategic autonomy, economic decoupling from rivals (perceived and real), and self-reliance. This is one of the main issues that I analyze in my recent book on European energy politics.

Why is it important for the EU to be self-reliant in its green energy transition?

For the EU and the rest of the world, it is important first and foremost to achieve a low carbon energy transition within the shortest time possible. This is because the effects of climate change are devastating, and we are just seeing the beginning of them; without a global green transition, the damage will soon be beyond repair. Multilateralism and international cooperation to achieve a global energy transition would be the best and most efficient way to tackle climate change; there are studies and scenarios that clearly show this. If the green energy transition becomes an arena of geopolitical rivalry, as is happening now, the second-best option for the EU is to ensure that it is not too vulnerable to external supply shocks hindering its transition or the functioning of its renewables-based energy systems. Achieving full self-reliance is impossible, as emerges from the targets in some of the EU's most recent documents—the Green Deal Industrial Plan, the Critical Raw Materials Act, and the Net Zero Industrial Act. The EU should maintain a broad green diplomacy and continue to advocate for and pursue the green transition across geopolitical dividing lines. The relationship with China, a key supplier of critical minerals and green technology, as well as a major polluter, is essential in this regard.

How do attitudes toward a green energy transition differ between EU member states and how does this affect EU policy?

For many years, there was a significant East-West divide in EU policies concerning climate and the green transition. Eastern member states, particularly countries like Poland, were reluctant to support these policies, as shown by Warsaw's initial opposition to the goal of EU climate neutrality by 2050. This is due to several reasons, such as greater reliance on coal and arguably the weaker influence of green parties and green topics in mainstream national politics. Also, for some Eastern members, eliminating energy dependence on Russia took priority over the transition (so you would build an LNG terminal as fast as possible rather than invest on the longer-term goal of climate neutrality). This East-West division oversimplified the picture somewhat, and even within the West there were differences (Northern countries being generally more ambitious in climate policy), but it did exist in key negotiations. I think that today this division is somewhat less relevant. This is not just because right-wing populists lost power in Poland. On the positive side, there appears to be broader agreement that the 2030 and 2050 climate targets must be met to avoid a climate catastrophe. On the negative side, green energy policies are more threatened in the West as well, which is experiencing a 'greenlash' driven by right-wing parties and, in some cases, centre-right parties trying to recover lost popularity. In Western Europe, the speed of the green transition will also depend on whether the far right reaches power: I do not think that Marine Le Pen or Vox, let alone Alternative for Germany, will prioritise the green transition.

You wrote back in 2018 that the Italian Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*) and League (*Lega*) parties were seen as Russia-friendly. How have their stances, and those of Italian politics more broadly, changed since the invasion of Ukraine?

The League has toned down its explicit admiration of Putin and his policies, but beyond the surface it remains Russia-friendly because of ideological affinities with the ruling party, United Russia—for instance, conservatism, chauvinism, anti-LGBTQI+ views. The Five Star Movement underwent a big transformation after 2018, when it had formed a government with the League. Back then, at least one third of the party's voters were right-wing voters that had become disillusioned with mainstream right-wing parties. In 2019 the League-Five Star government collapsed and, under the leadership of Giuseppe Conte, the Movement steadily shifted towards the centre-left. It formed a government with the Democratic Party and later supported the Draghi government. The current skeptical stance of the Movement towards large-scale military supplies to Ukraine has more to do with the strong pacifist strand in the Italian left and society and with a preference for diplomatic negotiations. It has little to do with a Russia-friendly stance, even if some party members may occasionally say something along these lines; in fact, the party never had ties with the Russian establishment comparable to those of the League or Berlusconi's Forza Italia. Moreover, based

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on polls, only a minority of Italians support arms shipments to Ukraine; this also explains why some opposition parties try to capitalise on the issue.

How do you think EU-Russia trade relations will develop long-term? Could the importation of Russian fossil fuels return to previous levels?

Fossil fuel trade will not return to previous levels. Even if there were a sudden (now highly unlikely) turn in Russian domestic politics and relations with the EU improved, the EU is committed to reducing its fossil fuel consumption decisively. This trend was clear already before 2022; the war and the EU's response, particularly the REPowerEU Plan, accelerated the process. At the same time, we should remember that the EU continues to import some pipeline gas, LNG, oil, and nuclear fuel from Russia. Russia remains a highly competitive exporter and, especially if the political relationship improves, it could regain some of the lost ground simply as a result of market developments. However, it will not be like before the war; Russia itself has reoriented significant volumes of its exports towards Asian and other markets, and the Russian leadership no longer wants to see the country's economy and its exports overly dependent on Western markets.

How should EU energy policy change and evolve in the coming years to meet climate change mitigation goals?

This is a huge question. Staying on a general level, there should be increasing domestic commitment, including financial commitment, to the energy transition and the climate agenda. Moreover, society as a whole should be restructured progressively to strive for a low-carbon economy. This will be extremely difficult because most Europeans are not willing to give up habits that are at odds with the climate agenda, such as driving private cars or living very 'energy-intensive' lives in general. I doubt that individual choices will lead to the desired outcome in terms of climate targets; only decisive steering from the top, coupled with widespread awareness of the destructive effects of climate change, has a chance of succeeding. In the global arena, as I said earlier, the EU should pursue broad green diplomacy and seek cooperation on the energy transition across geopolitical dividing lines. The EU should also support low-carbon transitions in the Global South, where financial resources and technological know-how are missing.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

This is a tricky question: the answer depends on many factors. Very broadly speaking, I recommend that they follow their interests as much as possible in their research, as it is not easy to stay in academia if you have to focus on something that is not really interesting to you. I would also recommend that they take a critical stance on their research topics, especially in social sciences. I feel that there is too much conformism due to funding mechanisms, peer pressure, and political pressure. Also, truly international networks matter if you want to try to understand how the world is developing. Very often I find myself discussing global issues in contexts where there is a dominant or even exclusive white Western perspective; geopolitical or other dividing lines should not apply to academia.