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Renewable Energy Multilateralism - A First Reflection on the 2026 International Vienna Energy and Climate Forum (9-10 April)

By Irene Giner-Reichl

Abstract: *As narratives on climate action and the transition to low-carbon energy systems (two sides of a coin) shift in response to events and voter reactions, it becomes ever more imperative to demonstrate the usefulness of renewables for economic prosperity and military-political security in order to secure relevant funding and political buy-in. The recent 2026 International Vienna Energy and Climate Forum set out to do exactly that, and successfully, in my view. It also showed how more technical consensus building and knowledge transfer produces tangible results when it is combined with mechanisms for (regional) multilateral cooperation.*

Powering Prosperity, Security and Stability, the overall theme of the International Vienna Energy and Climate Forum (9 and 10 April 2026, Hofburg) could not have been more topical.

A Background of Changing Narratives

In 2019 the EU embarked on a series of decisions that became known as the EU Green Deal. The EU aspired to lead global endeavors to stabilize the climate. Climate change, after all, is seen by a large majority of the EU population as a major threat. Cutting GHG emissions would also make the EU more innovative, resource-efficient and thereby more competitive globally, the reasoning went.

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it became strategically imperative to disentangle the EU from its high dependency on Russian oil and especially gas. The move towards renewables was now invigorated by considerations of political agency and military autonomy.

Disentangling from Russian gas led to steep hikes in energy prices in the EU, especially in countries that had been particularly dependent on Russian fossil fuels, such as Germany and Austria. The EU had to purchase gas in global markets and was willing (and capable) of paying a premium (passed on to end-consumers) to ensure security of supply. This crowded out financially weaker buyers – such as middle and low-income countries; it heightened stress on energy supply and



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increased energy poverty in these countries. The situation led to a general decline in prosperity.

In the EU, rising inflation bit into disposable income of financially weaker segments of the population, including the lower middle-class. The reaction at the polling stations was almost immediate: At the elections to the European Parliament in 2024 the Green Party (traditionally associated with climate action) lost significantly, their seats diminished by 18 to 52 seats; far-right ideologies (traditionally opposed to climate action) gained significantly. Similar election results occurred in various national elections, including in Austria in 2024 when the FPÖ garnered the most votes (28,8 % translating into 57 seats in Parliament). The Green Party (a partner in the coalition government preceding the election) reached only 8,2 % (minus 5,7) and became the smallest parliamentary fraction with 16 seats. Furthermore, support for the Paris Climate consensus has weakened, and not only because of the Trump II administration's decision to withdraw again from UNFCCC.

National and EU policies subsequently shifted and renewed the focus on inflation control, employment and prosperity for citizens. They did so – not by looking forward as in the EU Green Deal narrative where the energy transition (motivated by climate action) was seen as a pathway to higher innovation and hence global competitiveness, but by looking backward and attempting to shore up economic sectors and technologies that had served EU constituencies well in the past. The German car industry deployed its full lobbying force and secured various policy decisions that – so the hope went – would secure jobs and hedge vied-for market segments.

Proponents of the energy transition took into account this shifting political landscape and accommodated their narrative again. While glaciers continue to melt, extreme weather events multiply, and alpine rock formations tumble down with increasing frequency, the argument now is – and rightly so – that a renewable energy- driven economy secures decent jobs and generates reliable prosperity, and yes, it is also good for the environment.

The armed conflict engaged by the US and Israel against Iran a few weeks ago has driven home the point that continued dependency on imported fossil fuels is not just a risky, but really a very bad bet, and for everyone. The US President's openly stated ambition to grab Iran's oil (just as previously stated regarding Venezuela's) brings into clear focus how vying for (limited) fossil fuels so badly that international law and peaceful relations are violated without hesitation fans the flames of war and destruction. We can watch daily how civil infrastructure is targeted and non-combatants, children, women, men, are killed.

In her opening statement at the recent International Vienna Energy and Climate Forum (IVECF 2026) Austrian Foreign Minister, Beate Meinl-Reisinger, called renewables "Freedom Energy" which enhances national sovereignty and makes societies less vulnerable, more stable.



Citation: Giner-Reichl, Powering Prosperity, Renewable Energy Multilateralism, NSM Blog April 2026, <https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog>

More work for renewable energy diplomacy

If politics (finally) recognizes renewable energy's prosperity generating and freedom preserving potential and since there is no such thing as energy autonomy, new fields for renewable energy diplomacy open up.

Energy transitions currently occur nationally and regionally, everywhere on the globe. There is no universal framework for them, not even generally accepted guiding principles. The 28th CoP of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Dubai in 2024, for the first time, agreed on consensual language about a "transitioning away" from fossil fuels. In 2025, the Belem Action Mechanism on a Just Transition was launched. A first meeting of interested parties will be co-hosted by the Netherlands and Colombia later in April.

As irreplaceable as such a global commitment to a "just transition" is, the global energy transition also carries the risk of societal, national, regional and international disruptions. A systematic transitioning away from fossil fuels (which have made up roughly 80 % of global energy end use consistently for decades) will necessarily reshape geopolitical dynamics and create a landscape of inter-dependencies and ties between countries and regions that will differ very much from the present one.

To move from the current global architecture to the new global architecture requires cautious foresight and careful accompaniment, both of which in my view are not yet in place. In order to seize just transition opportunities, various stake-holders will have to work together in various constellations. Countries with differing levels of prosperity/wellbeing/development will want to set priorities differently. Low-income countries may need/wish to put poverty reduction first; middle and high-income countries have more leeway for political action, and more potential to truly fashion the energy transition according to their respective visions.

Scenarios are likely in which significant economies – e.g. that of China (which does so strategically, well aware that it lacks significant domestic fossil fuel deposits) – continue to base their economic development strongly and continuously on technological innovation, digitalization and de-carbonization. Other economies, e.g. countries that only recently made discoveries of significant fossil fuel deposits might find other pathways - let's call them blended strategies mixing fossil fuels with increasing percentages of renewables - more suitable to further national development aspirations.

What security valves do we have to defuse tensions arising from different climate action and energy transition policies lest they escalate to military confrontations or prosperity-destroying trade



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wars? Which avenues to promote the energy transition through international cooperation are realistically within reach?

Combining technical expertise and political will, and making best possible use of regional opportunities

IVECF 2026 closed with a Vienna Call to Action. In the section devoted to “Just Energy Transition Actions” three priorities are emphasized:

- **Achieve universal access to sustainable and affordable energy and clean cooking services by 2030:** Advance access with a focus on productive uses in rural and remote areas, with particular focus on LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.
- **Embed just energy transitions within national industrial policies and mobilize all available talent, including that of women and youth:** Promote policy coherence and empower the local private sector to engage in global value chains for sustainable energy manufacturing and servicing – leveraging renewable energy and critical mineral potentials to generate local green jobs and revenue.
- **Strengthen regional cooperation and integration as a central accelerator for just energy transitions:** Support the creation of integrated and inclusive regional sustainable energy power, product and service markets by strengthening power pools and the UNIDO hosted Global Network of Regional Sustainable Energy Centres (GN-SEC), which is attached to the regional economic communities (RECs).

To these three avenues I would like to add a fourth one, also taken from the IVECF Call to Action, given the horrible destruction ongoing wars are inflicting on people and infrastructure:

- **Building sustainable futures for crisis, recovery and reconstruction** • Align crisis recovery with green transformation by prioritizing resilient infrastructure, decentralised sustainable energy, and the restoration of local manufacturing and job creation for displaced populations, women, and youth, while aligning humanitarian, development, climate, and industrial agendas.

Amplifying the messages and increasing buy-in

Various global international processes will offer opportunities to amplify the IVECF messages, including the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development of ECOSOC, later this year in July when, i.a. the implementation of SDG 7 on sustainable energy for all will be reviewed. IVECF can and should also influence the broader discussions on a post-2030 development agenda.



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“When it comes to working jointly on a more sustainable and equitable green business model as a fundamental pillar for security, stability, and prosperity for all, integrated and systemic multilateral approaches addressing the transition toward sustainable energy, green industrialization, and climate resilience together with security, stability and prosperity in a coherent and mutually reinforcing manner will be essential, the Call to Action concludes”. I concur.



*Amb. (ret.) **Irene Giner-Reichl** continues to advocate for peaceful international relations. She has worked extensively on sustainable energy and development. She chairs the Global Forum on Sustainable Energy (GFSE) and the Global Women's Network for the Energy Transition (GWNET) with more than 5000 international members; GWNET supports women active in the energy sector through mentoring, knowledge transfer and networking while advocating for more inclusivity of the energy sector in general. Irene is active on the boards of several think tanks and lectures widely, including at universities in China.*



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