THE EU'S INDUSTRY ALLIANCES

The new corporate capture that threatens democracy and the environment

Friends of the Earth Europe

Summary

The European Commission has increasingly been turning to alliances with big business to 'get them on board' with meeting European Green Deal objectives. In reality, the alliances are another opportunity for industry to unduly influence political processes and direct public spending. Starting in 2017, these new alliances threaten public interest decision-making at a time when the climate, ecological and COVID-19 crises make it more vital than ever.

Experience shows that giving industries the reins on regulations and policies that affect their own sector produces outcomes that are weak, voluntary, and tilted towards their own financial interests.[1] DG GROW's new industrial alliances show the same pattern, and are incompatible with a democratic, transparent European Union.

The newly launched European Clean Hydrogen Alliance is a self-regulation project, giving companies with a vested interest yet another avenue to advocate for public money for the recovery and just transition to go to false solutions like carbon capture and storage and fossil-based hydrogen. Its goals risk perpetuating an energy system based on fossil fuels at the expense of real solutions such as community renewable energy.

Similarly, the European Raw Materials Alliance threatens to allow mining and metals giants to use Europe's green transition to justify and fund expanding resource extraction and consumption, at a time when Europe urgently needs to reduce it.

The Commission needs to end this kind of partnership, so the EU can start making decisions that move us towards climate and environmental justice, in the interest of the people.

Part 1

What are the European Commission's industrial alliances?

Starting in 2017, a new crop of industrial alliances – shaped, dominated and steered by industry – are increasingly being set up by the European Commission to (self)-regulate and direct public EU money into "strategic" fields like hydrogen and raw materials. Lacking sufficient means to do the work itself, the Commission is outsourcing the policy, regulatory and investment agenda to the very industries it is supposed to regulate. The result: the public interest and democratic process is undermined, while industry furthers its own interests.

A New Industrial Strategy... for business to write its own rules: In March 2020, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) published 'A New Industrial Strategy for Europe'. It heralded a "new type of governance" to achieve the "twin transition towards climate neutrality and digital leadership", predicated on business, Member States, regions and EU institutions joining forces.[2] This new "partnership approach to governance" rests heavily on industrial alliances:

> ***"Initiatives known as industrial alliances have produced good results in batteries, plastics and microelectronics. Now it is time to extend this idea to other key technologies and business areas. Building on the successful template of industrial alliances, a new European Clean Hydrogen Alliance will be launched. Alliances on Low Carbon Industries, Industrial clouds and Platforms, and Raw Materials should follow when ready."[3]***
>
> European Commission, 2020

According to the Strategy, industry sectors should "be invited and incentivised to define their own roadmaps". Meanwhile, the "co-design and entrepreneurial spirit" of this strategy should be supported "through Public Private Partnerships to help industry develop the technologies to meet their goals, as has successfully been done in industrial alliances."[4] These alliances will "steer work and help finance large-scale projects" using the knowledge of "SMEs, big companies, researchers and regions to help remove barriers to innovation and improve policy coherence."

In other words, they are explicitly about giving industry the pen to write their own rules, and direct public funding.

The blueprint for industry-friendly self-regulation

The Commission has justified this proliferation of new industrial alliances by referring to the 'successes' of the first few, namely the European Battery Alliance and the Circular Plastics Alliance.

The European Battery Alliance (EBA) was launched by the European Commission "together with EU countries and industry" in 2017, with the aim of creating "a competitive and sustainable battery cell manufacturing value chain in Europe.[5] An EU-affiliated research body, called the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) InnoEnergy, was "entrusted by the European Commission to drive forward and promote" the alliance's activities. EIT InnoEnergy's shareholders include Total, Naturgy, Engie and Électricité de France.[6] (See Box 4 for more on the EIT).

The Circular Plastics Alliance (CPA) was launched by the Commission in December 2018 to "boost the EU market for recycled plastics to 10 million tonnes by 2025".[7] The alliance's focus on recycling over reduction and reuse was at odds with the overarching objectives of the EU Plastics Strategy. The Circular Plastics Alliance went on to develop a voluntary declaration that lacked ambition, omitted the risks associated with the presence of toxic substances in plastic waste, and fell far short of tackling plastic pollution or Europe's dependency on fossil-based plastics.[8] Civil society was invited into the alliance after its objectives, targets and proposed actions had been agreed.[9]

A recipe for vested interests to thwart ambition

As a model, the Circular Plastics Alliance demonstrates precisely what experience tells us will happen – if we give industry the reins in its own regulation, the outcomes are weak, voluntary, and tilted towards the financial interests of the businesses concerned. In our current economic system, the nature of almost all businesses is to make profits for its shareholders, including by pushing its commercial interests. The duty of public regulatory bodies is to make rules that protect the public interest, within which businesses must operate. The Commission's new alliances are a dereliction of this duty. Indeed, it hands the responsibility to regulate business over to "non-transparent and exclusive" industrial alliances. The Industrial Strategy does not even mention civil society as a partner. This has been described by civil society groups as "a rolling back of established participatory processes".[10] What's perhaps most concerning about DG GROW's newest crop of alliances (see Part 2) is that they're enabling industry to direct billions of euros of public money… into their own pockets.

2020 saw the launch of the latest two new alliances: on hydrogen and raw materials. Vocal objections from civil society about the structural problems of new alliances (for example protesting at an industry lobby group holding the secretariat – see Part 2) have seen the Commission become more sensitive to its rhetoric around transparency and civil society participation. For example, by September 2020, Commissioner Breton was encouraging "more trade unions and NGOs to participate", so that the newly launched Raw Materials Alliance (see Box 4) "takes all aspects into consideration and is socially accepted".[11]

However, the fundamental problem of these alliances being set up hand-in-hand with, and dominated by, industry remains. Last minute pleas for civil society engagement to aid 'social acceptance' cannot change that. Some civil society groups feel they have no choice but to engage with the alliances, to try to represent the public or environmental interest or keep track of developments; others seek to avoid lending legitimacy to a setup rigged in the industry's favour.

Industrial alliances inspired by industry-dominated advisory group?

DG GROW's newly expanded love for industrial alliances has its origins in an advisory body that was dominated by the same industry groups that would go on to benefit from the alliances it encouraged.

The March 2020 New Industrial Strategy refers to the Commission's intention to build on the work of the Strategic Forum on Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEIs).[12] This Commission expert group was set up by DG GROW in March 2018 to advise the Commission on "key value chains for Europe" that "merit joint actions and investments between EU, Member States and industry".[13] Civil society groups have noted that the forum was "hugely dominated by industry".[14]

Taking a closer look at the composition of the Strategic Forum, we see that aside from member states and the European Investment Bank (EIB), there were 17 organisation members, 14 of which represented industry.[15] These included Hydrogen Europe (see Part 2), steel lobby Eurofer, cement lobby Cembureau, chemicals lobby CEFIC, paper lobby CEPI, mining giant Umicore, mining equipment firm Epiroc, as well as big business' heavy hitters BusinessEurope, France Industrie and Confindustria. No NGOs or trade unions at all.[16] Which is a far cry from the Commission expert group rules introduced in 2016, which require the Commission to strive for a 'balanced composition' of interests.[17] One has to wonder if these new industrial alliances are a way to bypass 'expert groups' (who advise the European Commission and whose composition is regulated) and allow for significant imbalances in power and composition benefiting industry.

The Strategic Forum published its final report in November 2019[18] – five months before the Commission published its Industrial Strategy announcing new industry alliances. The Strategic Forum's report identifies "key strategic value chains" with "great potential to contribute to Europe's green and digital transformation and to improve Europe's industrial competitiveness". These included 'hydrogen technologies and systems' and 'low-CO2 emission industry' – which are named as candidates for new alliances.[19] Moreover, it points to "successful examples of two existing initiatives on strategic value chains", namely the European Batteries Alliance and the €8 billion IPCEI in microelectronics.

In the minutes of the final meeting of the Strategic Forum in February 2020, DG GROW notes "the high relevance of the report in the context of the new EU Industrial strategy that the Commission will present on 10 March". It adds that based on the "utility of the Battery alliance in the preparation of the Battery IPCEI, a similar approach to develop IPCEIs in other strategic value chains should be considered".[20] It should be noted that IPCEI status allows for the provision of state aid.

In sum, when DG GROW wanted advice on where and how to channel public money and regulatory support, as part of an EU Industrial Strategy, it set up a group of vested industry interests to provide it: their answer was to channel it through industrial alliances comprised of vested industry interests. Whether an EU Industrial Strategy was truly needed (as opposed to the issues it covers – the green and digital transitions – being addressed through other existing EU strategies and legislation) was a moot point when industry stood to gain so much money and influence from it. The EIB meanwhile, also a member of the Strategic Forum, has subsequently hinted at its intentions to provide access to funding through DG GROW's new industrial alliances.[21]

Part 2

The Clean Hydrogen Alliance and its fossil fuel puppet masters

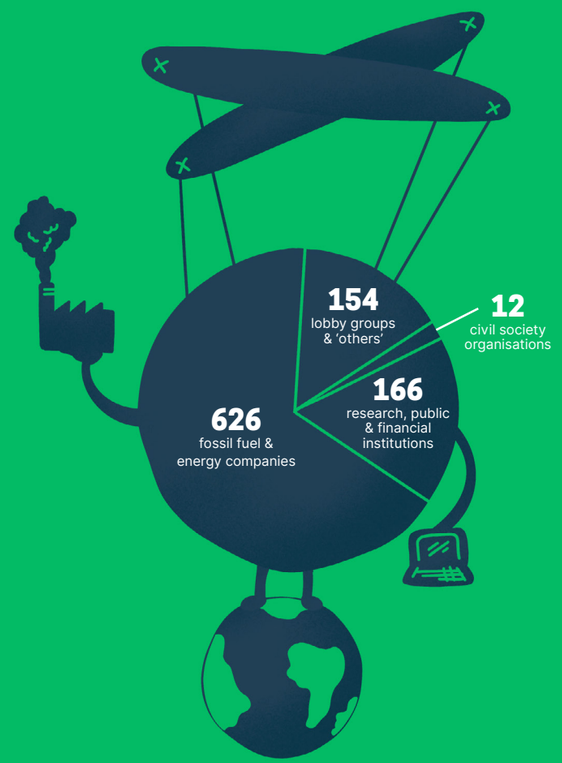
The March 2020 Industrial Strategy announced that the Commission would shortly launch a "new European Clean Hydrogen Alliance bringing investors together with governmental, institutional and industrial partners" to identify technology needs, investment opportunities and regulatory barriers and enablers.[22] In July 2020, the European Clean Hydrogen Alliance (ECH2A) was duly launched, as part of the Commission's new EU Hydrogen Strategy.

Analysis shows that the Hydrogen Strategy strongly echoes the industry's' wish list: emphasising 'technology neutrality' (ie not prioritising renewable 'green' hydrogen over fossil-based 'blue' hydrogen), hydrogen imports, and a revival for Europe' oversized fossil gas grid as hydrogen transport.[23] The creation, goals and set-up of the Clean Hydrogen Alliance, moreover, have had the fossil fuel industry in the driving seat from the start.

Who's who?

The fossil fuel industry is heavily represented in the Clean Hydrogen Alliance's members (as of 4 January 2021),[24] which include:

- **626 companies,** including numerous fossil fuel players such as BP, ENI, Equinor, ExxonMobil, GRTgaz, Iberdrola, Neste Oyj, REPSOL, Shell, Snam and Thyssengas – well on the way to the Commission's goal of 1000 companies by 2024;[25]
- **154 'other organisations'**, including many trade associations that represent the fossil fuel industry, such as Hydrogen Europe, Hydrogen Council, Eurogas, EURACOAL, FuelsEurope, European Gas Research Group (GERG), European Network of Transmission System Operators for Gas (ENTSO-G), International Association of Oil & Gas Producers (IOGP), Norwegian Oil and Gas Association, Netherlands Oil and Gas Exploration & Production Association and Bulgarian Natural Gas Association;
- **90** research organisations; **60** public authorities; and **16** financial institutions; and,
- **12 civil society organisations,** including five NGOs which explicitly state that they support renewable hydrogen only, and "do not consider fossil fuel based hydrogen as a short – or long-term solution".[26]



Who's on the Commission's Hydrogen Alliance?

Fossil fuel industry pushed fossil-hydrogen and CCS

On 3 February 2020, gas lobby group Eurogas wrote to Commission President von der Leyen commending the Battery Alliance, and strongly supporting "a similar approach for Hydrogen" which "should cover all forms of renewable and decarbonised hydrogen" ie 'blue' hydrogen from fossil gas with carbon capture and storage/ utilisation (CCS/CCU).[27] A few days earlier, on 30 January, oil and gas lobby IOGP met with President von der Leyen's European Green Deal adviser, to lobby for an initiative "like the Battery Alliance" but specially for CCS/CCU".[28] IOGP noted the importance of hydrogen, but expressed "doubts on the scalability" of green hydrogen, saying it "would prefer a focus on clean or low-carbon hydrogen" and mentioned "a study currently being funded by IOGP, with Hydrogen Europe" on hydrogen's potential in Europe.

Just over two months later, after March's Industrial Strategy announced the imminent launch of a Clean Hydrogen Alliance (but made no mention of a CCS alliance), IOGP changed tack, aiming to get its favoured CCS enshrined in the hydrogen alliance instead. On 7 April, IOGP wrote to President von der Leyen, Vice Presidents Timmermans and Dombrovskis, and Commissioners Simson and Breton stating that the establishment of the Clean Hydrogen Alliance "is a critical and decisive matter and IOGP stands ready to join". It added that the alliance must "encompass all clean hydrogen production technologies", and described hydrogen from natural gas with CCS as "a large-scale solution to the decarbonisation required".[29] What's more, IOGP claimed, Public Private Partnerships in CCS and hydrogen technologies "will provide a solid contribution" to the growth strategy "outlined in the Green Deal and a just transition". Thanks to their pressure – and that of Hydrogen Europe (see below) – the Clean Hydrogen Alliance mission includes not just a commitment to 'develop an investment agenda' in renewable hydrogen but also the ill-defined 'low-carbon' hydrogen.[30]

Hydrogen Europe: the primary architect of the alliance?

Hydrogen Europe is the lobby group for the European hydrogen industry, which is, in large part, the fossil gas industry. Originally set up by lobby consultancy FTI Consulting, its board members include gas sector giants Equinor, Gasunie and Vattenfall.[31] At the final meeting of the Strategic Forum on Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEIs) (an industry-dominated expert group that catalysed the new alliances, which Hydrogen Europe was a member of – see Part 1) in February 2020, Hydrogen Europe gave a presentation featuring a pyramid with 'Hydrogen Alliance' at its pinnacle.[32] It also noted strong support from member states for a "platform – similar to the Battery alliance – to facilitate coordination on Hydrogen issues". However, a new document released to Friends of the Earth Europe reveals that as early as 31 January 2020, Hydrogen Europe wrote to DG GROW thanking them and assuring them that, "We are happy to contribute the best we can to a success of a 'Clean Hydrogen Alliance'."[33] What's more, Hydrogen Europe attached a draft copy of its '2x40GW Green Hydrogen Initiative' with the following note:

> *"The paper is now up to be reviewed by DENA (German Energy Agency).* ***Yet, I wonder whether it might be possibly better if the paper would be reviewed or issued by your services. It then could serve as a basis for one of the round tables of the 'Clean Hydrogen Alliance'.*** *Please give me your feedback, so I can take the necessary steps."*[34]

What could demonstrate the closeness of the relationship between a lobby group and a Commission directorate more than the former casually suggesting that the latter issues the report it has written? The 2x40GW report sets out Hydrogen Europe's plan for 40GW of renewable or 'green' hydrogen produced in Europe and 40GW of green hydrogen produced in, and largely exported from, North Africa and the Ukraine, by 2030. Crucially, however, it promotes a "transnational European hydrogen gas infrastructure backbone" which, as well as green hydrogen, could be fed with "blue hydrogen (hydrogen from fossil fuels, whereby the CO2 is captured and stored)". According to the report, "blue hydrogen could create the large volumes of hydrogen, necessary to respond to the large demand centres and initiate the fast conversion of the natural gas infrastructure into a hydrogen infrastructure."[35]

Hydrogen Europe, like Eurogas and IOGP, pushed for a large role for 'blue hydrogen' based on CCS. However, CCS has long been heralded by the fossil fuel industry as a silver bullet to the climate crisis, but hundreds of millions of euros of wasted public money and well over a decade later, there is decisive evidence that CCS is nothing but a false solution designed to delay the transition away from fossil fuels.[36] Thus, while there may be a role for truly renewable-based hydrogen in some limited hard-to-decarbonise sectors, Hydrogen Europe's position is really about giving a life line to the gas industry – allowing its business model to continue for decades the climate crisis cannot afford – by resurrecting failed CCS technology for yet more financial and regulatory support.

Furthermore, three quarters of the renewable energy-based green hydrogen it wants to import would come from North Africa (24.5GW compared to just 8GW from Ukraine).[37] As Corporate Europe Observatory, Food and Water Action Europe and Re:Common have noted, this "repeats the same neocolonial relationship that already exists with fossil fuels, where the EU exploits the resources of its poorer neighbours to meet its own energy needs" without regard to "the social and environmental costs (such as increased water scarcity and land grabs)" or the debt burden such energy megaprojects create.[38]

Industry puts Hydrogen Alliance at the top of the decision making pyramid

https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupMeetingDoc&docid=39534 - slide 23

Hydrogen Europe published its final 2x40GW Green Hydrogen Initiative Paper on 15 April 2020, and although the Commission's name does not appear on the report, it has made its support for this initiative plain in numerous other ways:

- Hydrogen Europe reported that "Timmermans stated, in a recent discussion with the hydrogen industry, the support to make 'a success of this initiative'."[39] Released documents also reveal Hydrogen Europe describing Timmermans' "great interest" in the 2X40GW initiative at an exclusive videoconference in April 2020 (see Box 2).[40]
- In his press remarks on 8 July 2020 about the European Hydrogen Strategy and Clean Hydrogen Alliance, Timmermans stated that "for 2030, our target is to have a capacity of at least 40 gigawatts" and that by "working with partners to the East and to the South, the industry ambition is to add an additional 40 GW of electrolysers by 2030. **We will have 2x40 GW by 2030."**[41] At the alliance's launch event, Hydrogen Europe's Secretary General Jorgo Chatzimarkakis spoke alongside three Commissioners, and his presentation heavily featured the 2x40GW report.[42]
- The European Hydrogen Strategy itself describes how EU industry "has developed an ambitious plan to reach 2x40 GW of electrolysers by 2030". It states that "a coordinated effort" with the Clean Hydrogen Alliance, member states and "front-runner regions is needed", and says "the EU should actively promote" cooperation with "the Eastern Neighbourhood, in particular Ukraine, and the Southern Neighbourhood countries" (ie North Africa), citing industry's estimate that 40GW could be installed there "ensuring a sustained cross-border trade with the EU".[43]

First meeting of the Clean Hydrogen Alliance three months before it was launched?

On 6 April 2020, Hydrogen Europe held a videoconference with Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans "on the 2x40 GW Green Hydrogen Initiative". Despite being three months before the Clean Hydrogen Alliance was launched, documents released under freedom of information law have revealed that Hydrogen Europe claimed this meeting might "be regarded as one first meeting of the Clean Hydrogen Alliance as this initiative will engage actively CEOs as industrial partners to boost the hydrogen market."[44]

Hydrogen Europe described the purpose of its 6 April meeting as "Kick starting the Clean Hydrogen Alliance" (language used three months later at its official launch in the European Hydrogen Strategy), claiming the meeting on the 2X40 GW initiative "simultaneously represents the first concrete measure of the Clean Hydrogen Alliance highlighting the production of hydrogen. The next meetings will cover other parts of the hydrogen value chain (distribution, mobility, heating/cooling, industrial use)." As part of its prep for the April videoconference, Hydrogen Europe also asked its speakers to support "communications around the Clean Hydrogen Alliance conference". Clearly, the industry lobby group was in no doubt about the primacy of its role in the new Alliance, despite the fact it did not officially exist for another three months.

- Tweet Timmermans: https://twitter.com/TimmermansEU/status/1247173391632785408

- Tweet Simson: https://twitter.com/KadriSimson/status/1247171877363212289

- Tweet Hydrogen Europe: https://twitter.com/H2Europe/status/1247178747909996546

And it seems both European Green Deal Commissioner Timmermans and Energy Commissioner Simson were in agreement: the former tweeted about the 6 April meeting that "#Hydrogen has a crucial role to play in the transition... It was great discussing 'how' with @H2Europe",[45]and the latter that "Together with EVP @Timmermans and Hydrogen Europe we see the potential of #hydrogen"[46]. Hydrogen Europe tweeted its thanks to the Commissioners and the "14 CEOs that joined the conversation today on #hydrogen's crucial role in the #energytransition and #recoveryplan. Looking forward to working all together!"[47] Elsewhere, it was reported that those 14 CEO members of Hydrogen Europe included EDF, Enel, NEL, tyssenkrupp, and SNAM.[48]

Backlash from Hydrogen Europe's offer to host secretariat

Days after the Industrial Strategy was published in March 2020, Hydrogen Europe wrote to Commissioner Breton to welcome the strategy's promise of a Hydrogen Alliance, offering its "strong support". Thanks to documents released under freedom of information law, Corporate Europe Observatory, Food and Water Action Europe and Re:Common were able to reveal that Hydrogen Europe went even further, offering to run it: "We are about to ramp up our capacities and can offer our services to prepare and run the 'Hydrogen Alliance'."[49]

In early July 2020, just before the Alliance was launched, Euractiv published an undated leaked draft describing the set-up of the Clean Hydrogen Alliance.[50] The draft Commission document stated that "Hydrogen Europe took a lead and has worked actively towards a proposal for governance of the Alliance together with GROW" adding that the alliance "will be driven by industry but it will also include all stakeholders in the hydrogen ecosystem."[51] The proposed Governing Board was chaired by a Commissioner, with twelve industry representatives "selected by Hydrogen Europe" – including Shell, Verbund, SNAM, Gasunie, EDF, Vattenfal and Hydrogen Europe – alongside "regions and cities (2), civil society (3), Clean Hydrogen Partnership (FCH JU) and Member States (3)". The draft also described six Industrial Pillars, whose "workstreams will be organised by Hydrogen Europe, with participation open to other stakeholders". In other words, the Commission's plan was to let Hydrogen Europe pick the majority of the governing board and set the agenda of all workstreams.

Euractiv also reported that, in response to NGO concerns that industry board members would face conflicts of interests when deciding which projects to finance, the Commission said that the "commitment of participants to the ambitious objectives of the alliance in terms of emission reductions should avoid potential conflicts of interest."[52] This is an extraordinarily naive defence. Yet the Commission claimed its role in the "progress monitoring will ensure that all initiatives of the alliance are fully aligned with the objective of climate-neutrality and serve the public interest". It promised that the alliance would be open to all stakeholders, and was "built on the principles of cooperation, inclusiveness and transparency". This couldn't be further from the picture of overwhelming fossil industry influence in the alliance's formation and governance described above.

Clean Hydrogen Alliance roundtables still run by industry

Outcry and backlash from civil society groups, the renewable industry and Green MEPs did ultimately cause the Commission to rethink its wholesale transfer of power to Hydrogen Europe. In the end, instead of six industrial pillars whose workstreams are organised by Hydrogen Europe, the Clean Hydrogen Alliance has six industrial roundtables, each with a different facilitating organisation. The six 'CEO roundtables' "cover all operations of the hydrogen value chain, from production to end use"; however, the "overall facilitation of the different roundtables' activities is supported by Hydrogen Europe."[53] Not so very different after all?

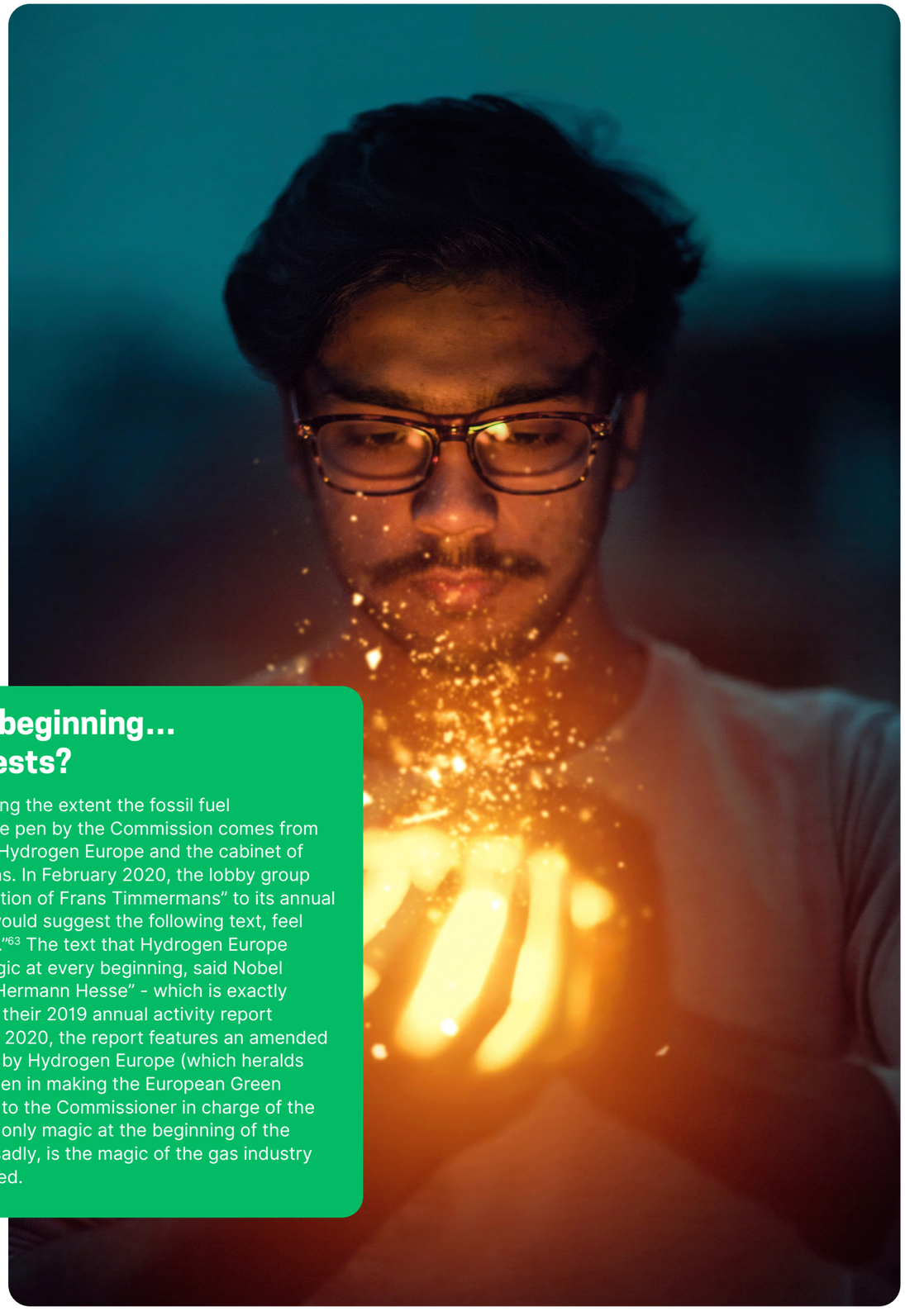
Both DG GROW and Hydrogen Europe advertised the call for the six thematic roundtable applications in October 2020, which closed in November.[54] The roundtables' final set-up and composition, far from fixing the problem, shows a dominance of vested dirty energy interests, and a high-degree of overlap between the same companies, or their representatives:

- The roundtable on hydrogen production (which covers CCS) is facilitated by solar energy lobby SolarPower Europe (whose members include Total, ENI and Vattenfall[55]), and its Co-chairs are the CEOs of EDF, Ørsted and Enel Spa. Other members include Total, IBERDROLA, Verbund, and the Zero Emissions Platform (representing BP, Shell, Equinor, Total ExxonMobil et al).[56]
- The roundtable on clean hydrogen transmission and distribution (which covers pipelines) is facilitated by ENTSO-G, a problematic lobby group[57] originally created by the Commission to predict future gas needs and provide a list of infrastructure projects required to meet them, which its members (such as SNAM, Gasunie and Enagás) then receive millions in public subsidies and build. Thanks to this inherent conflict of interest, ENTSO-G's inflated projected gas needs are part of the reason Europe is locked into decades of unnecessary and costly gas infrastructure.[58] The roundtable's co-chairs include Spanish gas grid company Enagás, and oil and gas storage company Vopak. Other members include Polish oil and gas company PGNiG, E.ON and SNAM.[59]
- The other four roundtables focus on: 'hydrogen in industrial applications', facilitated by chemicals lobby Cefic (whose executive committee includes ExxonMobil and Shell Chemicals[60]); 'hydrogen in the energy sector', facilitated by wind energy lobby WindEurope (whose members include Vattenfall, Shell and engie[61]); 'hydrogen for mobility', facilitated by car lobby ACEA; and, 'hydrogen for residential applications', facilitated by oil and gas boiler lobby European Heating Industry.[62]

Spot the difference!

Hydrogen Europe's vision of the Clean Hydrogen Alliance

The European Commission's vision of the Clean Hydrogen Alliance in response to criticism



Magic at every beginning… or vested interests?

A revealing example showing the extent the fossil fuel industry has been given the pen by the Commission comes from correspondence between Hydrogen Europe and the cabinet of Vice President Timmermans. In February 2020, the lobby group asked "for a short contribution of Frans Timmermans" to its annual activity report: "If I may I would suggest the following text, feel free to amend and change."[63] The text that Hydrogen Europe wrote begins "There is magic at every beginning, said Nobel prize winner for literature Hermann Hesse" - which is exactly how Timmermans' entry in their 2019 annual activity report begins.[64] Published in April 2020, the report features an amended version of the text drafted by Hydrogen Europe (which heralds the "pivotal role" of hydrogen in making the European Green Deal a success) attributed to the Commissioner in charge of the European Green Deal. The only magic at the beginning of the Clean Hydrogen Alliance, sadly, is the magic of the gas industry getting all its wishes granted.

Kick-off! But where will the game take our climate?

On 29 May 2020, Hydrogen Europe sent a letter signed by 90 of its CEOs – including the chief executives of EDF, Enagas, Engie, Snam, Total, Vattenfall, grtgaz and gasunie – to Commissioners Timmermans, Simson and Breton, to express their willingness "to swiftly engage" with the EU institutions in the Clean Hydrogen Alliance, which is the "ideal institutional approach" to steer and manage the political process in the context of hydrogen's key role in the COVID-19 economic recovery, the EU Green Deal and 2050 climate goals.[65] Timmermans' cabinet responded to Hydrogen Europe: "We highly appreciate your deep commitment and essential support."[66]

At the official kick-off meeting of the Clean Hydrogen Alliance on 8 July 2020, just after the European Hydrogen Strategy was launched, Commissioner Simson described the alliance as "the leg on which the strategy will run".[67] The 'industry perspective' was given by seven companies/associations,[68] including Austrian electricity company Verbund, which called for the "long-term objective of renewable hydrogen" to be "complemented in the short term by low-carbon hydrogen" (read: fossil-based hydrogen is the reality for the foreseeable future). Italian gas infrastructure giant SNAM emphasised the conversion of the gas pipeline system (starting by "blending hydrogen" in), and the "opportunity to import renewables from North Africa" (read: preserve the gas industry's business model, and build new pipelines across the Mediterranean). Dutch gas infrastructure firm Gasunie promoted a "'carbon performance' principle based on technology openness" (read: no discrimination against fossil-based hydrogen). The 'perspective from civil society' featured three organisations, including CAN Europe, which noted that the Alliance "needs to address the risk of potential conflicts of interest and to involve civil society closely in the process", and the European Environmental Bureau, which flagged the risks of CCS and "of locking in fossil fuels during the transition period".[69]

A few days after the kick-off meeting, Hydrogen Europe had a follow up call with DG GROW, and "reported very positive feedback from industry CEOs." And, after more than six months of shaping and sculpting the Clean Hydrogen Alliance into a near-perfect industry body, minutes from the call unironically note that "Hydrogen Europe appreciates the call for transparency of the alliance and fully agrees on the importance of involving civil society organisations closely".[70] Yet, there are signs that Hydrogen Europe is quite comfortable presenting itself as the embodiment of the alliance, with, for example, its Secretary General appearing on a web talk in September 2020 with a banner of the Clean Hydrogen Alliance (under the European Commission logo) as his background.[71]

The Clean Hydrogen Alliance's first assembly, dubbed the 'European Hydrogen Forum', took place on 26-27 November, jointly organised by DG GROW "and the Fuel Cells and Hydrogen Joint Undertaking (FCH JU), in partnership with Hydrogen Europe".[72] The FCH JU is itself a research public private partnership between the European Commission and Hydrogen Europe.[73] The event was heavily packed with fossil fuel sector interests, and Hydrogen Europe spoke six times over the two days.[74]

In January 2021[75], French Green MEP Damien Carême filed an access to documents request to Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen expressing concerns about the governance of these new industry alliances. The Commission replied[76] that industry alliances were a way to act in fields where there was an 'urgency to act' therefore confirming our suspicion that these industry alliances are used to bypass more regulated decision-making forums such as expert groups.

The letter also points out that the conditions of organisation and governance of the different alliances should stay flexible to give space to the members to organise themselves. This reply is worrying and indicates a lack of consistency between alliances and, more importantly, a lack of regulation that gives the possibility for any member (industry included) to push for governance principles in their interest. Given the level of industry influence in the creation and composition of the alliances studied in this briefing, this raises legitimate concerns that industry representatives will manage to steer the alliances, and anything they will produce, in the direction most profitable to them.

Storage tank for liquid hydrogen fuel.
Photo credit: TomFawls / Wikimedia commons

Later in its response, the Commission uses the same argument to argue that, in the case of the Hydrogen Alliance, any member could speak out if they think the role of one member (in this case, the questionable role of Hydrogen Europe) is not in line with principles of inclusion, non discrimination, transparency etc.

So what does all this mean for our climate? The Clean Hydrogen Alliance is a model for and by dirty industry, and the Commission's token gestures towards inclusivity are far too little too late. The alliance threatens to give carte blanche to the fossil gas industry to capture public money, resurrect false solution like CCS, and perpetuate its polluting business model and neocolonial energy relationships, with hydrogen imports predominantly from North Africa. If we are to prevent catastrophic climate change, and ensure a just transition, we must start by reclaiming democratic processes from vested interests. Fossil free politics demands an end to structures like the Clean Hydrogen Alliance.

European Raw Materials Alliance: industry in the driving seat

WHAT?

The March 2020 Industrial Strategy stated that "Future alliances should also include low-carbon industries, Industrial Clouds and Platforms and raw materials." On 3 September 2020, the Commission's Communication on Critical Raw Materials announced the launch of "an industry-driven European Raw Materials Alliance" (ERMA), "initially to build resilience and strategic autonomy for the rare earths and magnets value chain, before extending to other raw material areas".[77] Its set up differs from the European Hydrogen Alliance, but industry is still very much in the driving seat.

WHO?

The Raw Materials Alliance is managed by EIT RawMaterials,[78] a consortium initiated and funded by EU research body the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT). EIT's goals are to increase Europe's competitiveness and growth by promoting partnerships between business, education and research organisations;[79] it is a big promoter of public private partnerships.[80] EIT RawMaterial's Executive Board includes metals producer Atlantic Copper, mining and metals firm ERAMET, mining giant Umicore, high-tech metals and minerals firm Findeco, and engineering consultancy AME Group.[81] EIT RawMaterials describes Euromines and the Industrial Minerals Association as "organisations that we work closely with",[82] while the Chair of the Steering Committee of one of its 'Innovation Hubs' is Tata Steel.[83]

EIT RawMaterials offers reassuring words that the Raw Materials Alliance "is an open and inclusive alliance that provides an open and independent forum";[84] however, the alliance cannot both be "industry-driven" – as the Critical Raw Materials communication sets out – and inclusive and independent. Whilst it may be open to – and promises to involve - all relevant stakeholders, including "industrial actors along the value chain, Member States and regions, trade unions, civil society, research and technology organisations, investors and NGOs",[85] its 500+ members currently only include one trade union (industriALL) and four NGOs (Ayni Verein für Ressourcengerechtigkeit, Fauna & Flora International, Sazani Associates and Quercus - ANCN). Dwarfed by more than 250 companies (such as ArcelorMittal, Atlantic Copper, Aurubis, Boliden, Epiroc Rock Drills, Eramet, Solvay, Hyundai, Renault, Siemens and Veolia) and trade associations (including the Cobalt Institute, CSR Europe, Eurometaux, Euromines, EURACOAL, European Copper Institute, Industrial Minerals Association Europe, Nickel Institute, France Industrie and Confederation of Danish Industry).[86]

INFLUENCED BY?

Friends of the Earth Europe made a freedom of information request to DG GROW for minutes of meetings with interest representatives, at which the formation of a European Raw Materials Alliance was discussed in the three months before its launch. By asking about meetings with interest representatives on this subject, the scope of our request covered all kinds of lobbyists – industry, civil society, trade unions, etc.[87] However, DG GROW's response revealed that between 1 June and 3 September 2020 it apparently met only industry representatives and the EIT RawMaterials to discuss it.[88]

The three meetings DG GROW disclosed reveal a consistent industry-friendly picture in the Raw Materials Alliance's origins. On 18 June 2020, Commissioner Breton had a video conference with representatives of the non-ferrous metals sector. The names of the companies/trade associations are redacted,[89] But the online list of meetings held by Commissioner Breton however reveal that this meeting was with Boliden Group, Aurubis AG, ERAMET, Umicore, EUROMETAUX and Norsk Hydro.[90] The minutes state that the "Non-ferrous metals sector support[s] new Industry Alliances, with several of (sic) companies participating on batteries, hydrogen and rare earths" and adds that the sector "would also give support for a broader raw materials alliance approach covering the wider metals and minerals required in the green and digital transitions".[91]

The industry is keen on the Raw Materials Alliance because it is designed to direct public funds into industry projects and facilitate industry's regulatory wishlist. A wishlist which includes "supportive environmental legislation" to enable the expansion of EU mining projects, and emphasises that the EU will always need to import raw materials, and therefore needs to "secure" its access with "dedicated EU financial tools to support upstream industries".[92]

This will have an impact on countries exploited most by extractivism and colonialism, for which Europe has long been an offender. These measures would allow the settler state and industry to continue guarding or managing the resources of the local and national economies through trade and economic policy, further enabling systems of oppression and poverty.

On 9 July 2020, Vice President Šefčovič had a video conference with the non-ferrous metals sector[93] – company names were again redacted, and the online meeting transparency data says only that the meeting was with CEOs from Eurometaux.[94] The minutes reiterate the sector's support for Industry Alliances, and under next steps says "Regarding the upcoming European Raw Materials Alliance, the industry will identify core partners who can contribute to the initiative." It is also noted that Eurometaux will send the Commission "a document that presents regulatory barriers that member companies face when considering investments in the EU, together with proposals to address these barriers."

There can be no doubt that the Raw Materials Alliance was intended to be an initiative by, for and of industry. And the industry argues that in order for it to "take steps towards Green Deal targets" it "needs enabling conditions with coherence between climate, circularity and other policy objectives to ensure predictability and investment security". Which, as the minutes of the meeting make clear, means they want "competitively priced energy in the EU", "compensation of Emission Trading System indirect costs" including for nickel and copper, a stable state aid policy, and "trade and competition policies for an international level playing field".[95]

DG GROW also released slides used by EIT RawMaterials to present the planned European Raw Materials Alliance at a meeting on 17 July 2020, noting that no minutes of the meeting were made. The slides described the future alliance's objectives as establishing an "EU industry stakeholder consultation processes – value chain specific"; redefining EU industrial policy to "remove regulatory and financing bottlenecks"; and creating a "Materials Investment Platform". The presentation by EIT RawMaterials was given nearly two months before the Raw Materials Alliance was announced, but it was clearly already stitched up with industry lobby groups: one slide titled "Outreach and Alignment – Ongoing" is followed by the logos of trade associations including Eurometaux, mining lobby Euromines, steel lobby Eurofer, CEFIC and ACEA.[96] Another describes the alliance's workstreams as including "REE [rare earth elements] and Magnets as first cluster, ongoing". This is followed by a slide showing the "REE and Magnet Cluster of Companies (Status: July 2020)", including Atlantic Copper, Epiroc and Siemens. Lo-and-behold, REE magnets and motors was the Raw Materials Alliance' s first workstream cluster, with its first meeting held in December 2020.[97]

https://www.asktheeu.org/en/request/8764/response/29631/attach/4/Presentation%20slides%20EIT%20RawMaterials%2017%2007%202020.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1 slide 5

Clearly, the Raw Materials Alliance's work had been planned in consultation and 'alignment' with industry months before it was officially launched. This comes at a time when there is strong community resistance to, and predicted massive environmental destruction from the only known deposit of REE in Europe – the Norra Kärr mine in Sweden.[98]

CONSEQUENCES?

When the Critical Raw Materials communication was published in September 2020, announcing the Raw Materials Alliance, over 200 civil society organisations and academics wrote to the Commission to express their deep concern over the communication's contents, noting the urgent need for it to be realigned with the interests of the planet and communities.[99] Namely, by ensuring real action is taken to reduce absolute EU resource consumption, that communities' Right to Say No to mining projects is respected, and that exploitation of third countries is ended.

However, the existence of the industry-dominated Raw Materials Alliance gives corporations with vested interests the pen to write their preferred framework in taking the communication's actions forward, and the keys to public money for new investments. As the wish list of the metals lobby shows, the European Raw Materials Alliance risks being a platform for self-regulation that enables and funds European industry to mine Europe and the world – with environmental, human rights and neocolonial implications – in the name of the European Green Deal, and predicated on ever-growing consumption.

Part 3

Conclusion

We are facing an unprecedent time in history. The climate, ecological and COVID-19 crises are threatening people and planet and we need our decision makers to prioritise the public interest, now more than ever.

It is disappointing and inadequate to see the European Commission structuring advice, framing regulation and directing public spending through the set-up of a number of high-level Alliances with big business and dirty industry.

The European Clean Hydrogen Alliance is a dangerous self-regulation project, allowing fossil fuel companies with a vested interest to shape the debate and potentially funnel public money meant for the recovery and just transition to false solutions like CCS and fossil-based hydrogen. This perpetuates the continued dominance of fossil fuel companies and status quo. This is at the expense of community renewables that put the power in the hands of people instead of corporations.

The European Raw Materials Alliance threatens to allow mining and metals giants to use Europe's transition to justify and fund expanding resource extraction and consumption, to increase their profits. Europe urgently needs to reduce its resource use, and that means tackling our growth-obsessed economic model. But we have no chance of doing this if the public policy and investment agenda is handed over to corporations whose business models rely on continued resource extraction and consumption, through industrial alliances like the Raw Materials Alliance. The Commission needs to end this kind of partnership, so the EU can start making decisions that move us towards resource justice.

The Clean Hydrogen Alliance shows how the fossil fuel industry is continuing to dominate the climate debate and present its polluting activities as part of the climate solution. As long as we continue privileging and funding industry that has been delaying, weakening and sabotaging climate action for decades, Europe will not be able to avoid a future where fossil fuels (including fossil hydrogen) are locked-in. That is why we are demanding that this toxic industry does not have a seat at the table: we need Fossil Free Politics now.[100]

CC Image from https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/group-business-talking-meeting_2911122.htm

The EU has always had a tendency to rely on industry for input, and big business is more than happy to come along. Over the years we have denounced the cosy relationship our decision makers have with industry lobbyists.[101] From excessive lobbying to dangerous[102] self-regulations[103], it is clear that big business has too much influence over our decision making.

DG GROW's industrial alliances are the latest idea to give industry the reins in its own regulation, which inevitably leads to outcomes that are weak, voluntary, and/or twisted towards the financial interests of the businesses concerned; this kind of corporate capture has no place in a democratic, transparent EU, capable of tacking the climate, biodiversity and related crises.

Now more than ever it is crucial for the European Commission to rethink its priorities and for other EU institutions to hold it accountable.

The European Commission must put an end to any and all ongoing and future industry alliances. The EU must invest the necessary resources to generate its own independent research and limit the dependence on industry input. This is the only way we will obtain the public interest decisions and the environmental and social policies people need.

Endnotes

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