Preface

The impetus for this book stems from my time spent in Hungary since my first trip in 1994. Observing the 2004 eastward expansion of the European Union highlighted the dramatic social and political readjustments countries make. The 2009 Russia–Ukraine gas crisis brought to the fore the different perspectives held by leaders in the ‘old’ and ‘new’ EU Member States. Before then, the electricity and gas system were treated like other networked industries, with a political impetus for privatization and elimination of market barriers. Suddenly, the security of gas supplies and Russia’s associated political leverage over the former Communist countries became apparent to leaders across the EU. The subsequent prioritization of security of supply and the building up of the Agency for Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER) demonstrated the seriousness of the Single Energy Market project within the EU. However, subsequent actions by national governments show support for cross-border projects, but domestic energy markets remain the domain of national politicians.

This book provides an analysis of three countries’ political-economic transition from Communism to a system marked by market competition, and, for two out of the three countries, the presence of a weakened democratic system. The use of culture to frame the energy transition, and the power struggles around it, come from my experience in the region. Culture emerged as the most appropriate term to describe the differences between countries and the social practices and policies within the energy systems.

My professional background in the region began when I moved to Budapest, Hungary, in 2006. I started work at the Regional Center for Energy Policy Research (REKK) at Corvinus University and later moved to Central European University (CEU). Now CEU is forced to move from Hungary by the Orban government. Despite this, I plan to remain on this side of what is again a political divide. Through this vantage point, one can observe the political events since the 2009 financial crisis (and now the 2020 Covid-19 crisis), challenge the idea that the freedom to exercise political rights is a natural progression for the region. What I hope to convey in parts of this book is the lack of recognition for society’s demands undermines the ability to build a just energy transition in the EU. If the EU wants a just energy transition, then democratic norms also must be respected in the energy system.

This book provides an assessment of how Hungary, Lithuania, and Poland changed their energy systems since their EU membership and their likely trajectory towards implementing a just energy transition. I use a critical tone to question the geopolitical and equitable decisions made in each country. As the case studies show, there is an almost inevitability of the economics and geopolitics that shape the region and constrain the choices for political leaders. But it is in the choices and actions of the political actors that expose the power relations interconnecting society, the EU, and Russia. A just transition requires the state to act in the interests of society by recognizing a broad spectrum of rights.

The central task of the book is to raise awareness of these three countries and the challenges faced by governments and citizens to build an equitable energy system. As the book points out, policies from the European Union come up short in addressing the financial and security aspects of the energy system in these new EU Member States. This book provides an in-depth account of the power struggles within each country and the two super-powers of Russia and the EU, forcing each state to decide the orientation of their energy system.

The conceptual framing of ‘energy cultures’ stems from the observable, but hard-to-describe differences between each country. Culture is describable but not definable. This book advances two theories, energy justice and a culture of geopolitics, to set up and expose power relations within the energy system. These power relations, and the struggle to gain power and influence the types of resources and technologies in use, lead to the production of energy cultures. There are demarcations and choices in each country’s use of energy resources and technologies. Common social, political, and economic histories in the three case studies provide the context to explore the different geographical context and tension within the exertion of geopolitical power. The framework of energy cultures provides a means to understand the strong power relations within the energy system.

The European Union built a system of governance, endowing national energy regulators with a specific job of balancing the political, business, and social demands. These efforts came out of the Lisbon Treaty that reformed the Union to enable an expanded EU to function. There are now calls to implement a just energy transition in the EU. This transformation would require a scheme that would rival the process of comitology and institutional building in the East. The energy system is central to the political and economic control of a country. Changes to the energy system require broader systemic changes in state and social relations. For the EU and governments to be successful in building an equitable energy transition, then the people of Eastern Europe need to be heard. As this book describes, those who control the energy culture also choose the resources and technologies of the energy system. A just transition

requires recognition of all members of society while providing them with access to affordable and sustainable energy.

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