On the link between weather regimes and energy shortfall during winter for 28 European countries

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Abstract:

Increasing the proportion of energy generation from renewables is one of the necessary steps towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, renewable energy sources such as wind and solar are highly weather sensitive, leading to a challenge when balancing energy demand and renewable energy production, and therefore in managing energy shortfall. Identifying periods of high shortfall, here defined as when demand significantly exceeds production by renewables, and how these periods are affected by weather, is therefore critical. We use a previously constructed energy dataset derived from reanalysis data for a fixed energy system to analyse the link between weather regimes and periods of high shortfall during the boreal winter for 28 European countries. Building on previous work we provide a perspective spanning from the subcontinental scale to individual countries. For each country we identify days with critical energy conditions, focusing on those with high energy demand, low production from wind and solar, and high energy shortfall. We highlight how differences in renewable capacity and in climate influence the sensitivity of shortfall to demand and renewable generation. Of the six North Atlantic weather regimes considered here, only a subset are found to favour the occurrence of high shortfall days. In particular, blocking-type weather regimes affect large parts of Europe, suggesting that shortfall days can occur across multiple countries simultaneously. Furthermore, if a subset of countries experience shortfall days, neighbouring countries have a higher likelihood of also experiencing shortfall days. Motivated by this result, we examine the hypothetical impact the coldest European winter of the 20th century, 1962/63, would have had on the present-day energy system. It is found that the persistent blocking conditions associated with that winter, if they occurred today, would lead to higher demand and shortfall across large parts of Europe during most of the winter, and be exceptional in this respect compared to other winters.

1. Introduction

A transition towards renewable energies is one of the main objectives of the European Green Deal to limit global warming (European Commission, 2019). While weather conditions so far predominantly affected the energy network through influencing energy demand, renewable energy sources such as wind and solar generation are intrinsically dependent on weather (van der Wiel et al., 2019a; Bloomfield et al., 2016). Thus, with the increase in the proportion of renewable generation, the energy network is becoming more weather-dependent, implying the challenging task of balancing variable energy sources with variable energy demand.

The current energy network in Europe is robust, making blackouts very unlikely. This is partly thanks to the European energy system being highly interconnected between individual, national entities. The European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E) has 40 member companies from 36 different countries (Member companies, n.d.). The member companies are Transmission System Operators (TSO) which are responsible for most of the transmission of electricity on national high voltage networks. They are targeted to guarantee the safe operation of the system and in many countries (including France, Germany, United Kingdom) they are also in charge of the development of the grid infrastructure.

However, even with such a robust network, there are consequences to periods of high demand and low renewable generation. If the supply of energy is limited, other energy sources are required which can be more expensive and/or more polluting (e.g. liquefied natural gas, energy imports, gas-fired power stations), leading to more volatile prices (Lawson & Voce, 2023; Beating the European Energy Crisis, 2022). These situations can be further amplified by political tension such as with the onset of the Ukraine war, which rekindled the fear of blackouts (Kingsley, 2022).

Recent studies have addressed the particular challenge of periods with high demand and low renewable generation, variously referred to as energy shortfall (van der Wiel et al., 2019a), energy compound events (Otero et al., 2022), peak demand-net-renewables (Bloomfield et al., 2020a), residual load (van der Wiel et al., 2019b), energy drought (Raynaud et al., 2018), and Dunkelflauten (Mockert et al., 2022). Understanding these periods of high demand and low renewable generation, hereafter called energy shortfall, is critical to the energy transition as any gap in energy generation will need to be covered by either using more polluting energy sources, importing energy from neighbouring countries, or using energy storage. These alternatives can harm the transition by either emitting pollution or affecting energy prices for consumers.

Among recent studies, some have investigated the influence of weather regimes on renewable generation (Grams et al., 2017; Thornton et al., 2017) including energy shortfall events (Mockert et al., 2022; van der Wiel et al., 2019b). European weather regimes are large-scale atmospheric patterns defined over the North Atlantic, representing most of the low-frequency variability (Michelangeli et al. 1995; Straus et al., 2007), meaning that beyond the day-to-day weather timescale (Hannachi et al., 2017). Weather regimes modulate surface weather (Cassou et al., 2004; Ferranti et al., 2018) and are associated with high-impact weather such as heatwaves and cold spells (Cassou et al., 2005; Matsueda, 2011). Weather regimes are used in the energy sector to characterise the potential for different energy scenarios (Grams et al., 2017) and also to provide forecasts at longer time ranges (Bloomfield et al., 2021). Their influence on energy-related variables (e,g. temperature, wind, solar radiation) motivates studies on the use of weather regimes to inform deployment of wind farms (Grams et al., 2017), to understand the sensitivity of a renewable energy generation system (van der Wiel et al., 2019b), or to forecast renewable generation (Bloomfield et al., 2021)

In the context of anthropogenic climate change, projected changes of atmospheric circulation and weather regimes, be it in frequency, persistence or pattern, are more uncertain than temperature projections (Shepherd, 2014). However, the evolution of weather regimes will affect their influence on surface parameters and extremes (Herrera-Lormendez et al., 2023). Therefore, having a good understanding of the current impact of such regimes on the energy system is crucial for assessing future impacts.

The aim of the present study is to understand the relationship between weather regimes and shortfall across 28 different European countries and regions. Ideally, this might be done with an ensemble of possible winters (produced by a climate model) for a given year, with the energy system at that time. However, that would depend on the fidelity of the climate model. An alternative is to use the observed record, as represented in reanalysis, as an indication of what is possible, applied to a fixed energy system. Such a counterfactual calculation is available in the energy dataset of Bloomfield et al. (2020b), for 2017 energy-system conditions. Although the European energy system has evolved since 2017, this dataset allows for the investigation of the impact of weather variability on energy shortfall for a contemporary European energy system, without the confounding effect of changes in the energy system. It is thus suitable for our purpose here.

As previous studies have looked at Europe as a whole (van der Wiel et al., 2019) or at individual countries (Bloomfield et al., 2018), we aim here to look at the entirety of the 28 European countries available in this dataset from a subcontinental perspective and highlight both their commonalities and their differences. For instance, the characteristics of extreme energy days and longer periods of extreme energy conditions are investigated. Additionally, we quantify the relative influence of weather regimes for energy shortfall on individual countries, and examine periods of simultaneous high shortfall across multiple countries. Finally, the energy effects of an extremely cold and persistent winter are assessed through a case study of the coldest winter in Europe of the 20th century (the winter of 1962/63) if it occurred under current (c. 2017) conditions, presenting a potential worst-case scenario.

2. Data and Methods

The ERA5 reanalysis dataset (Hersbach et al., 2020) from the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) is used to characterise the meteorological conditions. From ERA5, the daily mean 2-metre temperature (2mT), geopotential at 500 hPa (Z500), zonal (u10m) and meridional wind components (v10m) at 10-metres, and incoming solar radiation (ISR; top-of-atmosphere net short-wave radiation flux) are used. The dataset covers the period 1979–2022 for the extended winter season (October to April included) from 20N to 80N and 90W to 60E at 1 degree horizontal resolution. From the wind components the horizontal wind at 10-metres (W10m) is computed:

$$W10m = \sqrt{u10m^2 + v10m^2}$$

From the daily mean values of all variables, daily anomalies are computed by subtracting the climatological values. The latter is estimated by sampling over a running window of 5 days, meaning that the climatology for a given day *d* in the year includes all days from d-2 to d+2 of the years from 1979 to 2022.

Similarly to the ERA5 data, the extended winter months (October to April included) are included for the energy dataset from Bloomfield et al. (2020b). This dataset contains energy demand (in megawatts, MW), as well as the capacity factor (CF) of both wind and solar data, which have been derived from ERA5 at hourly resolution. This dataset has the benefit of covering a long period from 1979 to 2019 for 28 different European countries (see Figure 4). For the calculation of energy variables, human factors such as energy infrastructure and the socio-economic conditions (e.g. demography, behaviour) are set to 2017 conditions across the entire period. This allows us to interpret the variability in energy supply and demand as only weather-driven. In particular it allows us to sample the influence of weather and weather regimes on the current (c. 2017) infrastructure across a long period, to provide a larger sample size of weather variability.

The energy demand in Bloomfield et al. (2020b) is modelled using the population-weighted 2mT, thereby identifying periods where the population is likely to use heating (Heating Degree Days: HDD) or air conditioning (Cooling Degree Days: CDD). To identify the sensitivity of each country's energy demand to HDD and CDD, a multiple linear regression model using HDD and CDD is trained on observed national aggregated daily total demand (ENTSO, 2019) for the years 2016 and 2017 and evaluated on 2018 data. Two energy demand datasets are available, one including a weekly cycle which takes into account that demand is higher during weekdays than weekend days, and another where each day is considered a Monday. In this study only the dataset setting each day as a Monday is used. Although this renders the analysis less realistic, it allows for variations in energy to be driven by variations in meteorological conditions only, without the confounding influence of variations in socio-economic conditions and/or network constraints. Thus, as with the year-to-year variations, it increases the sample size of weather variability available for this study.

The wind CF in Bloomfield et al. (2020b) is estimated using horizontal wind at 100 m, as the wind turbines' hub height is assumed to be at 100 m. Additionally, the location of wind farms has been extracted from thewindpower.net by Bloomfield et al. (2020a) and is taken from the year 2017. Solar CF is estimated using incoming solar radiation and 2mT as temperature influences the efficiency of photovoltaic cells (e.g. reduced efficiency above 25°C). However the distribution of solar photovoltaic capacity is assumed to be uniform as reliable information is not available as it is for wind farms. A more comprehensive explanation of the model used to derive the energy data from the ERA5 data is provided in the supplementary material of Bloomfield et al. (2020a).

For better comparison with the daily meteorological data, the energy data is changed to daily values. For energy demand, the hourly demand is summed over the 24h of each day. The CF represents the ratio of generated wind or solar energy to the installed capacity. Therefore, to get the daily renewable generation data, the CF is averaged for each day and multiplied by the installed capacity of the respective energy source times the 24 hours in a day. The installed capacity is taken from the ENTSO-E transparency platform for the year 2022. The year 2022 is chosen as installed capacities for wind and solar are reported for all countries from this year onwards. Shortfall is computed by removing the daily wind and solar generation (both in MW) from the daily demand, and also given in MW.

a. Energy days definition

Shortfall is defined as the difference between energy demand and renewable energy generation, also known as residual load (van der Wiel et al., 2019). It is important to note that while shortfall is generally positive, meaning demand is higher than renewable generation, it can also be negative if renewable generation can cover energy demand and more. This can happen for countries with very high renewable capacity such as Denmark and Germany.

We here focus on days with extreme energy conditions, which are called energy days. These are defined as days when a particular energy index goes above or below a percentile threshold, where the percentile is sampled from the distribution over the studied period. We consider four different cases of energy days: 1) demand days, when energy demand is above the 90th percentile; 2) wind drought days, when wind CF is below the 10th percentile; 3) solar drought days, when solar CF is below the 10th percentile; and 4) shortfall days, when energy shortfall is above the 90th percentile. The corresponding extreme energy events are treated as a series of consecutive energy days. We choose these percentiles in order to have sufficiently large sample sizes to enable a robust statistical analysis, checking the sensitivity to percentile choice in a few cases.

To discuss the effects of persistence, brief energy events are defined as those lasting four days or less, while long energy events are defined as those lasting five days or more. As a check of robustness, the analysis was also performed defining brief energy events as lasting three days or less and long events as lasting five days or more, disregarding four-day events (so as to create a clear distinction between brief and long events). The results are very similar, therefore four-day events are included in the brief events, which allows not to lose any data.

To highlight the effect of very persistent weather regimes, we analyse the extremely cold winter of 1962-1963 (Sippel et al., 2024). As the energy dataset used here does not cover this winter, we use another available dataset covering the period from 1950 to 2020 (Bloomfield & Brayshaw, 2021). This latter dataset uses a similar methodology to the one used here except for the demographic conditions. However, the location of wind farms is taken from 2020 rather than 2017, and the installed solar capacity is not spread homogeneously as in Bloomfield et al. (2020b), but based on actual solar farm locations extracted from Dunnet et al. (2020) and Stowell et al. (2020). Moreover, the wind and solar CF are provided for only 12 countries compared to the 28, and demand is not provided. However, the population weighted temperature for each country is available. Using the model parameters from the previous dataset and the demand model instruction provided in the supplementary documents of Bloomfield et al. (2020a), the demand data is computed. For consistency, the energy days are computed using the percentile values from this dataset covering the period 1950-2020. These percentile values are very similar, within 1%, compared to the shorter dataset from Bloomfield et al. (2020b). Further investigation also showed that the results obtained in section 3a are essentially the same with only minor differences in amplitude.

b. Weather regime computation

We compute weather regimes using the k-means clustering algorithm on Z500 anomaly data (Michelangeli et al., 1995; Hannachi et al., 2017; Falkena et al., 2020). Following the recommendations of Falkena et al. (2020), the clustering is performed on the full anomaly field instead of performing a dimensionality reduction first. The k-means algorithm requires to set the number k of clusters, and iteratively identifies the optimal partition of the data. The most used weather regime classification uses four regimes (Michelangeli et al., 1995; Ferranti et al, 2014) but in recent years, new classifications have been proposed using seven (Grams et al., 2017) or six regimes (Falkena et al., 2020). Here different regime numbers (k = 4, 6, 7) are computed but we restrict ourselves to showing results for k=6. The results presented are qualitatively similar for each classification, and notable differences will be highlighted throughout the paper.

The clustering algorithm assigns each day to one of the six regimes, even if the daily atmospheric circulation is quite dissimilar to the corresponding (i.e. the nearest) regime. To account for this, a regime attribution is done as a second step. For each regime a time-series is created by projecting the daily Z500 anomaly field onto the regime centroid, following Michel & Rivière (2011). This time-series is then normalised and for each day the highest regime index is selected. Where this index exceeds one standard deviation, the day is attributed to the corresponding regime. Otherwise, the day is attributed to a “neutral regime”, indicating that the atmospheric circulation of that day is too dissimilar to any of the regimes in question.

3. Results

a. Characteristics of energy days

In this section, the characteristics of energy days including their inter-relationships, and how these vary from country to country, is discussed. This is done by a thorough analysis of all 28 countries included in the dataset (see Supporting Information), and all general statements made here are based on the full analysis. However, only a subset of countries is shown in the body of the paper, for illustrative purposes, in order to limit the number of figures. France and Germany are shown in most figures as they offer a study in contrasts; although they are neighbours with similar demography, France has very little installed wind capacity whilst Germany has a high wind capacity. The importance of this difference will be apparent in the results. If further differences are observed in other countries they are described and, in some cases, shown.

We first compute time-series of annual frequencies (see Figure 1 for the example of France and Germany). While there is no significant trend in the frequency of both solar and wind drought days across all countries, demand days see a statistically significant decrease in frequency for all countries at the 95% confidence level using a bootstrap resampling method. This decrease in frequency of demand days is anti-correlated with the increase in winter temperatures (October to April included) for each country (e.g. -0.80 and -0.86 Pearson correlation for France and Germany respectively, see Figures S5 to S7 for other countries), suggesting it as being related to climate change.

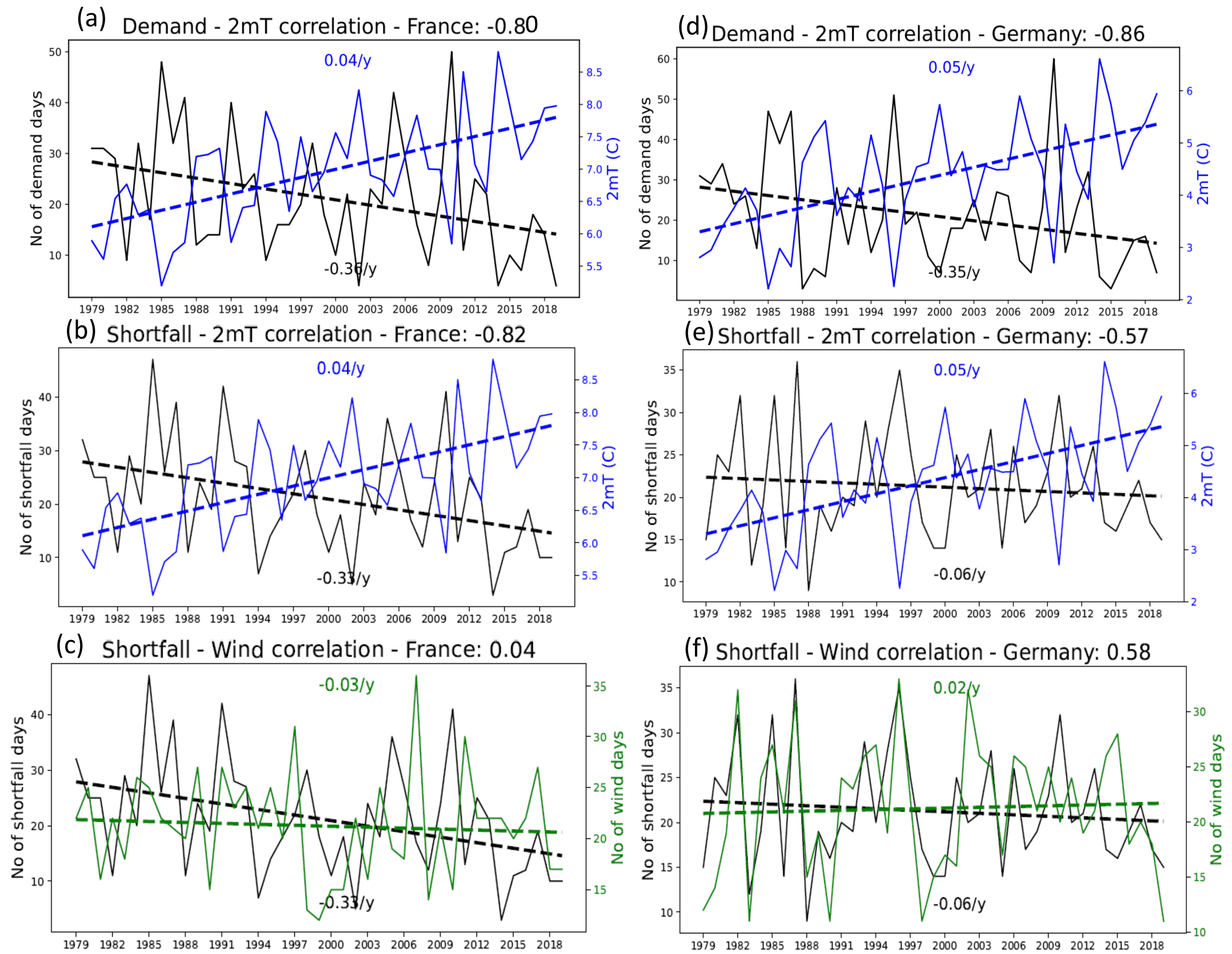

Figure 1: Yearly frequency of demand and shortfall days during the period 1979 – 2019 for France (a, b and c) and Germany (d, e and f). Panels a, b, d and e include winter mean 2mT while panels c and f show the yearly wind days frequency. The dashed line shows the associated linear trend. The value shows the slope of the linear trend in days per year, while the correlation between both variables in each panel is included in the title. Trends are statistically significant (p<0.05) for demand for both countries, but for shortfall only for France.

It is important to highlight that the trends shown here arise from meteorological factors alone, as the energy dataset used is idealised and does not account for societal changes or changes in energy infrastructure. As such, the trends show the sensitivity of the current energy system to changes in climate, and are counter-factual in nature. The actual trends would be affected by socio-economic factors, not just by changes in the energy system. As an example, the population of France rose from 55 million in 1982 to 67 million in 2020 (INSEE, 2021).

Shortfall days also see a decrease in frequency for all countries, however the magnitude of the decrease compared to that of demand days varies across countries. In the case of France and Germany, they have a similar trend of decreasing frequency of demand days. However, the decrease in shortfall days is much higher in France (-0.33 days/year) than in Germany (-0.06 day/year, Figure 1), and is only statistically significant for France, not Germany. Overall, while the decrease in demand days is statistically significant for all countries, the decrease in shortfall days is only statistically significant for one-half of them. We can understand this result by looking at the difference between France and Germany. In Figure 1b and e, the correlation between shortfall days and respective winter national 2mT is much higher for France than for Germany. However, in

Figure 1c and f, the correlation between shortfall and wind days is significantly higher for Germany than for France. This suggests that the difference in the shortfall trends between the two countries is related to the difference in sensitivity of shortfall to demand and wind generation. This reasoning can be applied to all 28 countries, and highlights distinct groups of countries. Those countries with higher wind capacity (e.g. Germany, Denmark; see Figure S1) and/or located in regions with warmer climates (e.g. around the Mediterranean basin) see similar results as in Germany, with only a small decrease in shortfall days frequency. On the other hand, those countries with lower installed wind capacity (e.g. France, Switzerland; see Figure S4) and/or located in colder climatic regions (e.g. Norway, Finland; see Figure S2 and S3) experience a stronger decrease in shortfall days frequency. In the first group of countries, shortfall is less sensitive to temperature and therefore to demand, and more sensitive to wind conditions, whilst the opposite is the case in the second group.

This difference between the two groups of countries is also evident when looking at the monthly distribution of energy days (shown in Figure 2 for the case of France and Germany). The energy demand days are generally more frequent during the coldest months of the winter (December, January, February; DJF) and less during the transition months (October, November, March, April), as expected. Similarly, most solar drought days occur in DJF as daylight is reduced. For wind drought days the monthly distinction is less clear but generally DJF is associated with windier conditions (Laurila et al., 2021; Molina et al., 2021) and less frequent low wind conditions across Europe (Gutiérrez et al., 2024). Therefore, most wind drought days occur during the transition months.

While these characteristics are common across all countries, for shortfall days the two groups of countries exhibit differences. In particular, countries with high installed wind capacity such as Germany (Figure 2h) have a broader distribution of shortfall days across the months compared to countries with lower installed wind capacity such as France (Figure 2d), where shortfall is more closely linked to temperature.

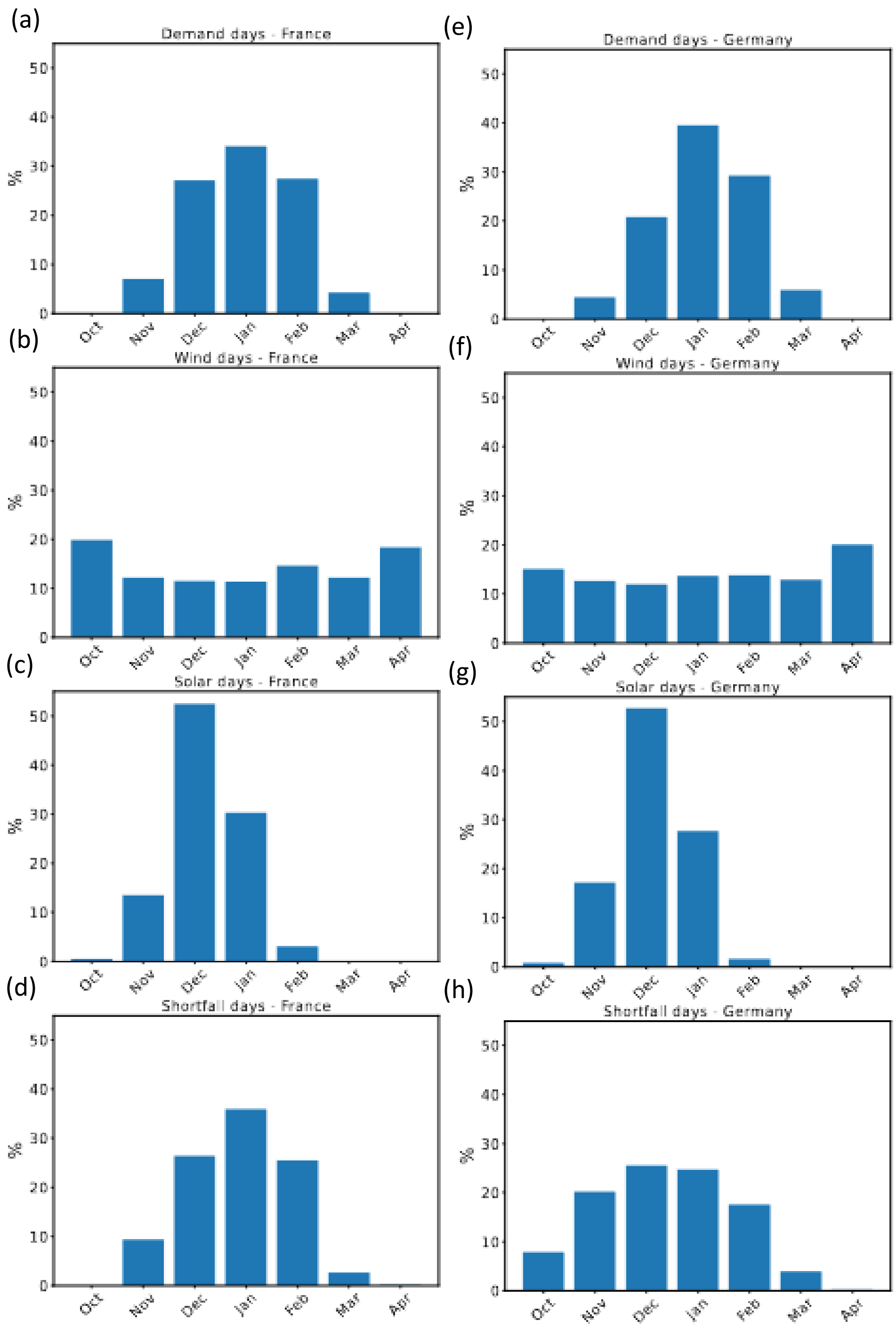

Figure 2: Frequency of energy days during each winter month for France (a - d) and Germany (e - h).

To further understand the differences between European countries, the percentage of shortfall days coinciding with demand, wind drought and solar drought days is displayed in Figure 3 (see Figure S8 and S9 for other countries). This illustrates that for countries with lower installed wind capacity (e.g. France) and countries in cold climates (e.g. Finland), the shortfall days coincide largely with demand days (Figure 3a and b). On the other hand, countries with high installed wind capacity (e.g. Germany) and countries in warmer climates (e.g. Italy) have shortfall days that overlap mostly with wind drought days (Figure 3c and d).

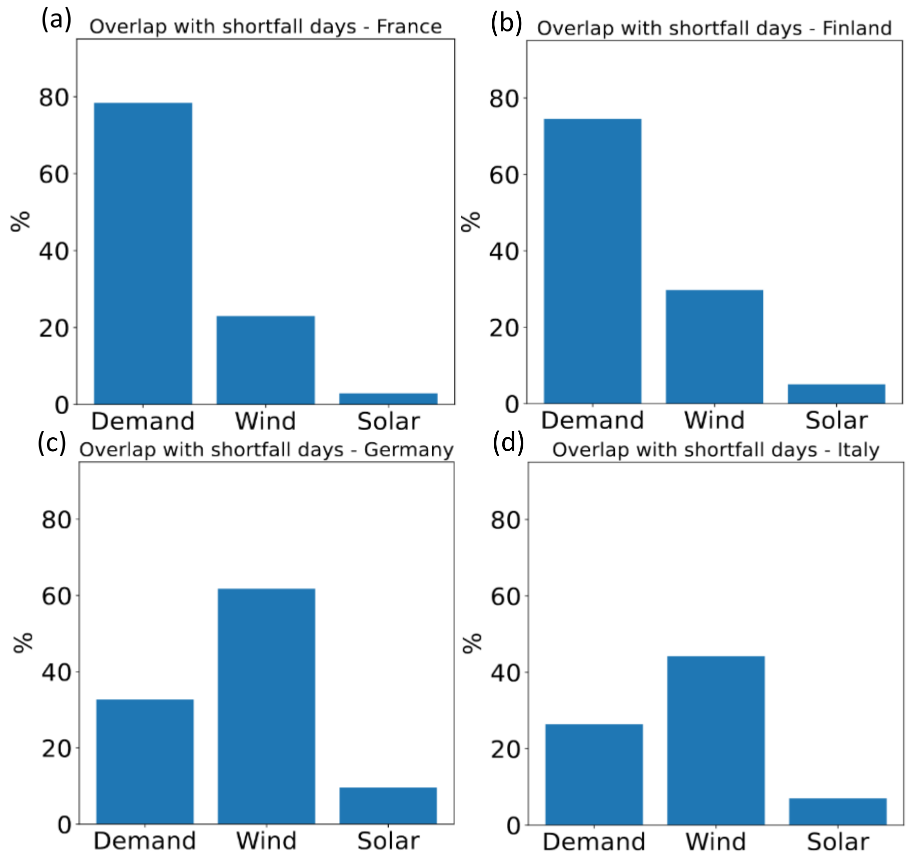

Figure 3: Percentage of shortfall days coinciding with demand, wind and solar drought days for France, Finland, Germany and Italy.

Figure 4 shows which countries have shortfall days that mainly coincide with demand or wind drought days, together with the respective percentages. The patterns seen across Europe help explain the behaviour discussed earlier in the context of Figures 1 and 2. This sensitivity to demand or wind depends on both the energy network of the country and the climatic region. For countries further north and/or with limited installed wind capacity, shortfall is mainly dependent on demand. For countries further south and/or with high installed wind capacity, shortfall is mainly dependent on wind generation. Poland and Lithuania are countries which can experience cold conditions but also have a relatively high installed wind capacity, therefore both demand and wind have similar importance for shortfall, consistent with Bloomfield et al. (2018) showing how the increase in installed wind capacity changes the sensitivity of shortfall to either demand and wind CF.

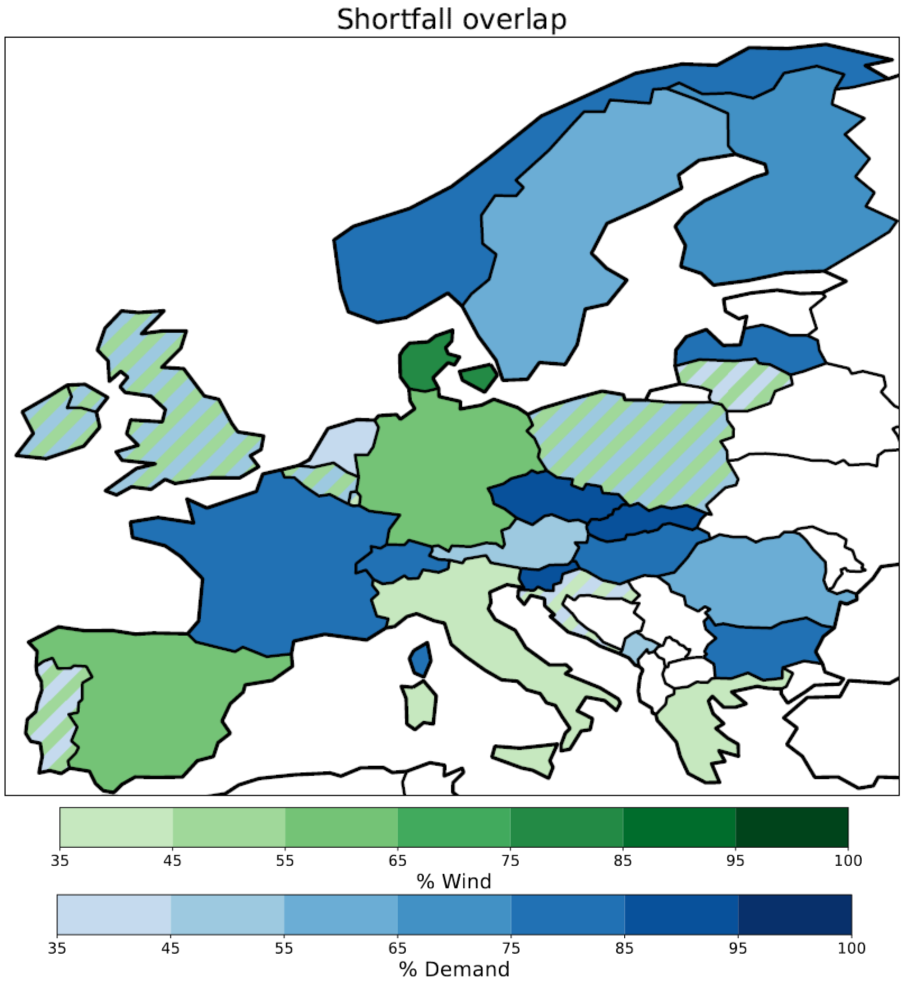

Figure 4: Percentage of wind days (for countries whose shortfall days overlap most with wind days) or demand days (for countries whose shortfall days overlap most with demand days) coinciding with shortfall days. Stripes show countries for which the percentage of shortfall days overlapping with wind or demand days is within 10%.

b. Characteristics of energy events

We next investigate whether the duration of energy events (that is, consecutive energy days) is associated with their intensity. For this comparison, Figure 5 shows the average and maximum shortfall values during brief and long shortfall events in France and Germany (see Figures S10 to S12 for other countries). As the two countries have different energy systems and therefore also their average shortfall length varies, shortfall is normalised by removing the climatological shortfall and dividing by the standard deviation, allowing for a better comparison.

Both average and maximum shortfall values are higher during long shortfall events. Similarly, demand values are higher and wind CF is lower during long shortfall events (not shown). This means that the extreme values of energy are often associated with neighbouring days where energy values are at least high or also extreme, either before or after or both. Van der Wiel et al. (2019a) shows that energy conditions get progressively extreme before energy events, supporting the notion that extreme energy conditions are preceded by days with high energy demand and shortfall, and low wind CF. The differences found here are however not statistically significant, suggesting that long events are not all associated with higher demand and shortfall, and lower wind CF. After further investigation, it is found that long events are also associated with colder temperatures (Figure 5b and d; see Figures S13 to S15 for other countries) which explains why demand and shortfall could be more important during long events. The conclusion is the same when defining shortfall days as days where shortfall is above the 95th percentile. While only France and Germany are shown here, this observation is applicable to other countries as well.

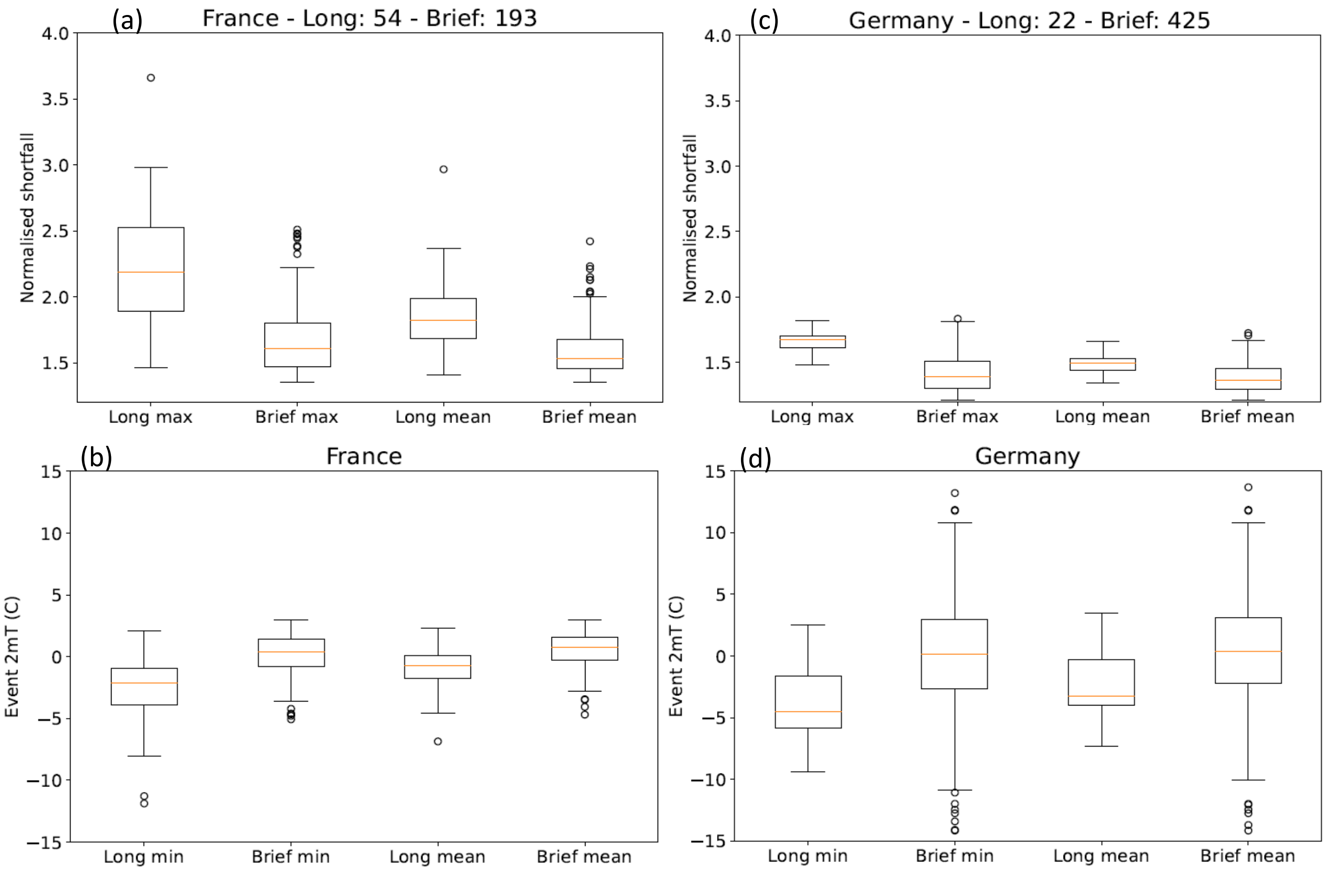

Figure 5: Boxplots comparing values during long and brief shortfall events, for the case of France and Germany. Figures a and c show the maximum daily shortfall value reached during an event and the mean daily shortfall values across an event. Figures b and d show the minimum daily 2mT reached and mean daily 2mT across an event. The box represents the 25th and 75th percentile range, while the orange line shows the median value. Whiskers show the 10th to 90th percentile range while the circles show outliers.

To determine the potential cause of the differences between long and brief events, Figure 6 compares the persistence of weather regimes during long, brief and no events (see Figures S16 to S18 for other countries). For each energy event, all regime events (consecutive days assigned to one regime) which coincide with the energy event are included. This shows that weather regimes are more persistent during shortfall events compared to weather regimes that do not coincide with energy events. However, the duration of shortfall events does not appear to be affected by weather regime persistence. The analysis nevertheless suggests that shortfall events are more likely during more persistent weather regimes.

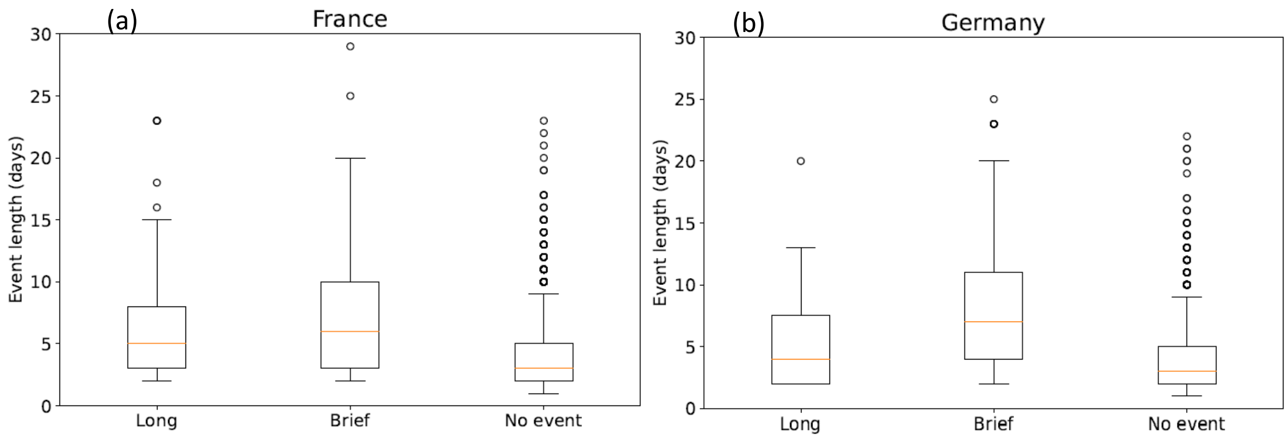

Figure 6: Persistence of weather regime events which occur during long or brief shortfall events and weather regimes which do not coincide with shortfall events, in France (a) and Germany (b).

c. Surface impacts of weather regimes

Before analysing the links between weather regimes and energy events, we describe the imprint of weather regimes on European weather. This allows to better understand how the weather regimes can impact energy. The six regimes selected here include the classical four weather regimes, namely: the Atlantic Ridge (AtR), positive and negative North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO+/-), and Scandinavian Blocking (ScBl). They additionally include the Atlantic Trough (AtTr) and Scandinavian Trough (ScTr). Figure 7 presents the Z500 absolute and anomaly composites of all six regimes. The AtTr regime has an cyclonic anomaly over the British Isles and two anti-cyclonic anomalies to the west and east, compared to the AtR regime which has an anti-cyclonic anomaly over the North Atlantic, to the west of the British Isles. The additional regimes split the classical NAO+ into two different configurations with a clearly zonal pattern for the ScTr, while the NAO+ defined in this categorisation shows a cyclonic anomaly over southern Greenland and an anticyclonic anomaly over northern Europe. It is important to note the difference with the classical representation of the NAO+ as this also leads to different surface impacts, compared to what is generally understood. The ScTr and AtTr regimes in this paper correspond to the Scandinavian Blocking negative and Atlantic Ridge negative, respectively, in Figure 6 of Falkena et al. (2020).

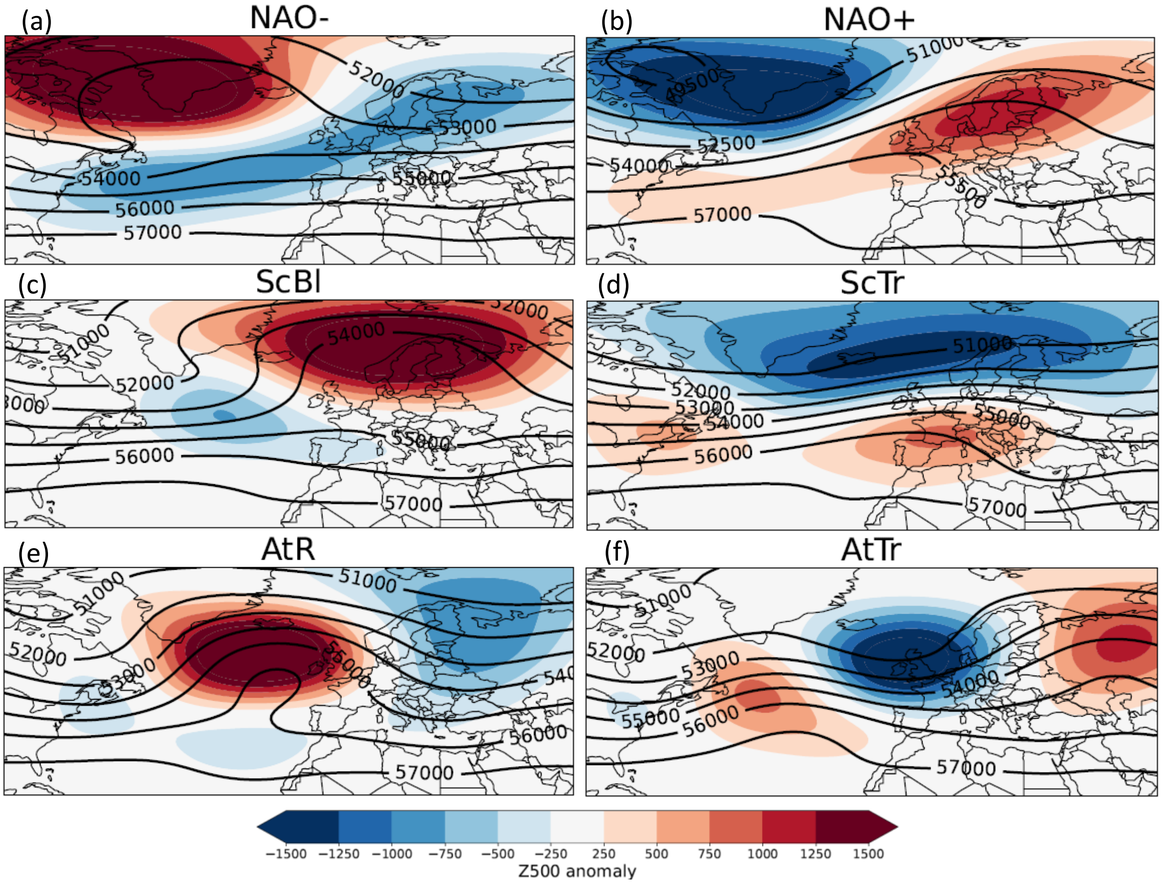

Figure 7: Composites of all six regimes: NAO- (a), NAO+ (b), ScBl (c), ScTr (d), AtR (e), AtTr (f). Colours show the Z500 anomaly and the contouring shows the Z500 absolute values.

Most regimes have a frequency around 10 to 12% with the ScBl, ScTr and AtR regimes being slightly more frequent at ~14%. The neutral days are even more frequent around 18%. The frequency of regimes across the cold season varies from month to month with most regimes being more frequent during the DJF period while the neutral days are most frequent in October and April. The higher frequency of neutral regimes during the transition seasons is in line with previous studies (Grams et al., 2017; Osman et al., 2023). The average persistence of regimes is fairly similar at around 3 days with the NAO- regime being most persistent (4 days) and the NAO+ and neutral regimes being least persistent (2 days).

To understand the relative influence of the weather regimes on energy variables, we show the regime composites of 2mT (Figure 8), W10m (Figure 9) and ISR (Figure 10). Cold temperatures across several countries are associated with the AtR, ScBl and NAO- regimes (Figure 8). The NAO- regime (Figure 8a) affects most of northern Europe with negative anomalies extending to southern Germany and northern France while temperatures reach close to 4 degrees below climatology over Scandinavia. The ScBl regime (Figure 8b) leads to lower temperatures over eastern Europe from Ukraine to Germany but the anomalies are less strong. Negative temperature anomalies during the AtR regime (Figure 8c) cover all of Europe with the strongest anomalies concentrated over continental Europe, from France to the Baltic countries.

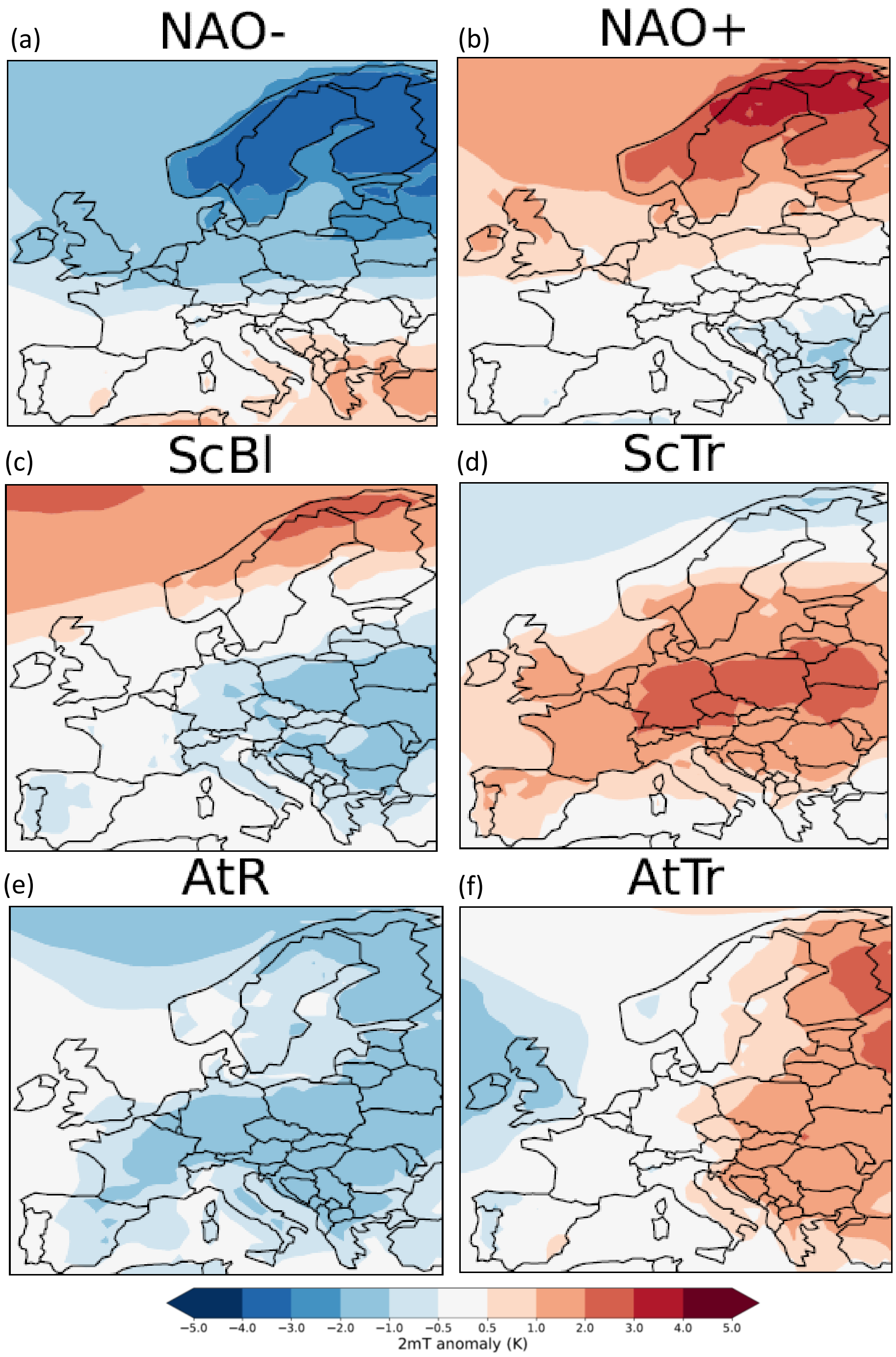

Figure 8: Composites of all six regimes: NAO- (a), NAO+ (b), ScBl (c), ScTr (d), AtR (e), AtTr (f). Colours show the 2mT anomaly.

These same regimes are associated with low wind conditions over some regions of Europe (Figure 9). The negative wind anomalies cover fewer countries but generally affect similar or neighbouring regions. These regimes (AtR, ScBl and NAO-) lead to lower wind conditions across northern Europe and the western coasts (Figure 9a, c, e) where a lot of the offshore wind farms are located. The NAO+ and AtTr regimes also show negative wind anomalies over northern Europe and Scandinavia (Figure 9b and d), respectively.

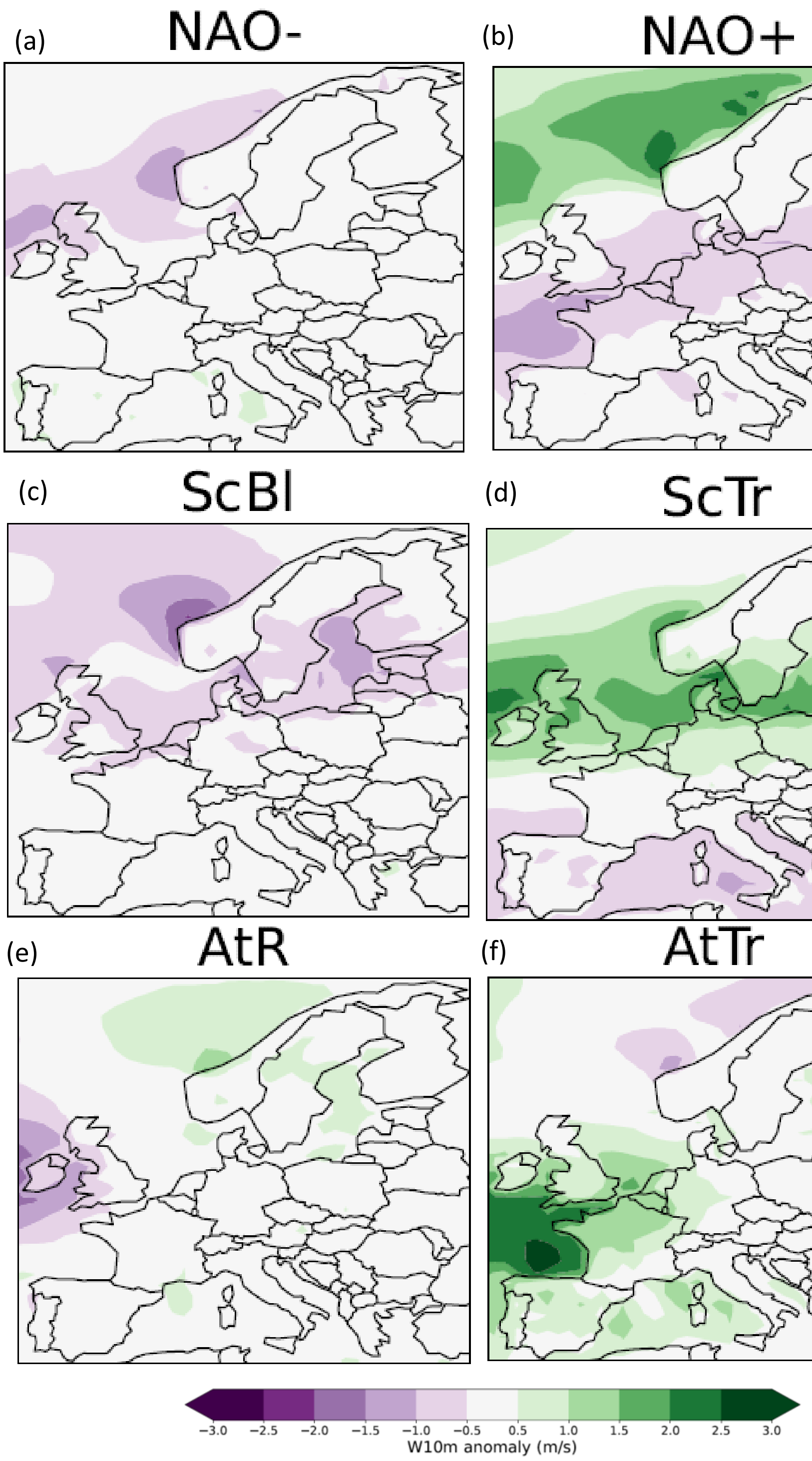

Figure 9: Composites of all six regimes: NAO- (a), NAO+ (b), ScBl (c), ScTr (d), AtR (e), AtTr (f). Colours show the W10m anomaly.

Low solar conditions follow different patterns, however (Figure 10). The NAO- and AtTr regimes (Figure 10a and e) coincide with low solar conditions across most of Europe while the ScBl regime affects southern Europe (Figure 10c).

Solar conditions are less relevant during the winter compared to summer due to shorter periods of daylight. As seen in section 3a, for some countries high shortfall can be mostly due to colder conditions, while for other countries, lower wind conditions are also important. Therefore, as the ScBl, NAO- and AtR regimes lead to both colder and lower wind conditions across large parts of Europe, these regimes are most likely to lead to higher energy shortfall.

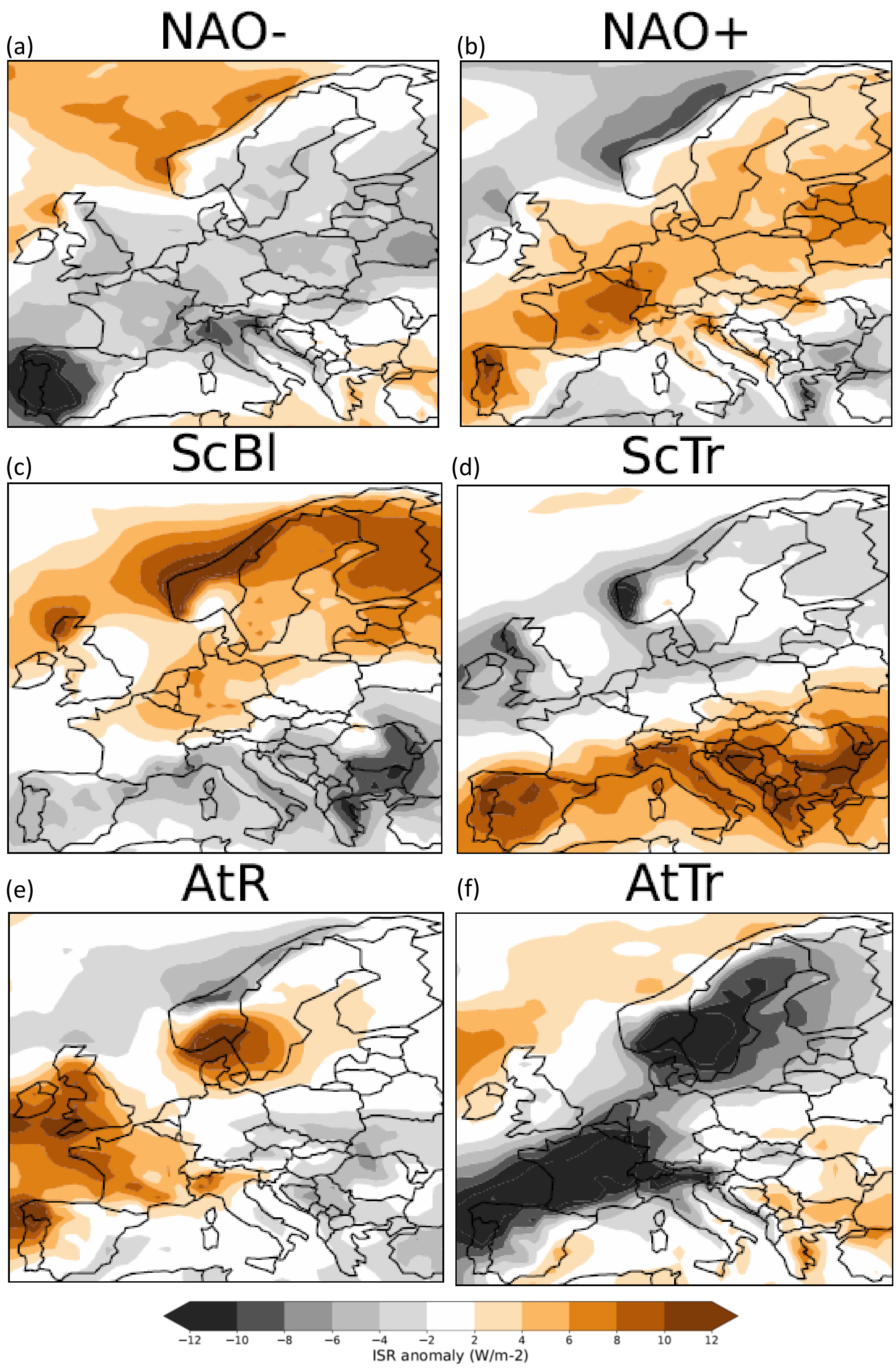

Figure 10: Composites of all six regimes: NAO- (a), NAO+ (b), ScBl (c), ScTr (d), AtR (e), AtTr (f). Colours show the ISR anomaly.

We next examine trends in the frequency of regimes (Figure 11). The ScTr and ScBl regimes show the highest trends in frequency with a decrease of ~9 days and an increase of close to 18 days, respectively, in yearly frequency over the last four decades. However, only the ScBl regime shows a statistically significant trend at the 95% confidence level using a bootstrap resampling method. In the other classifications, the ScBl regime and the ScTr regime (NAO+ for the classical classification using only four regimes where the ScTr regime is not present) also have larger trends compared to the other regimes (albeit being statistically not significant at the 95th confidence level). However, it is important to keep in mind that decadal to multi-decadal variability could influence these results, but investigating this was beyond the scope of this study.

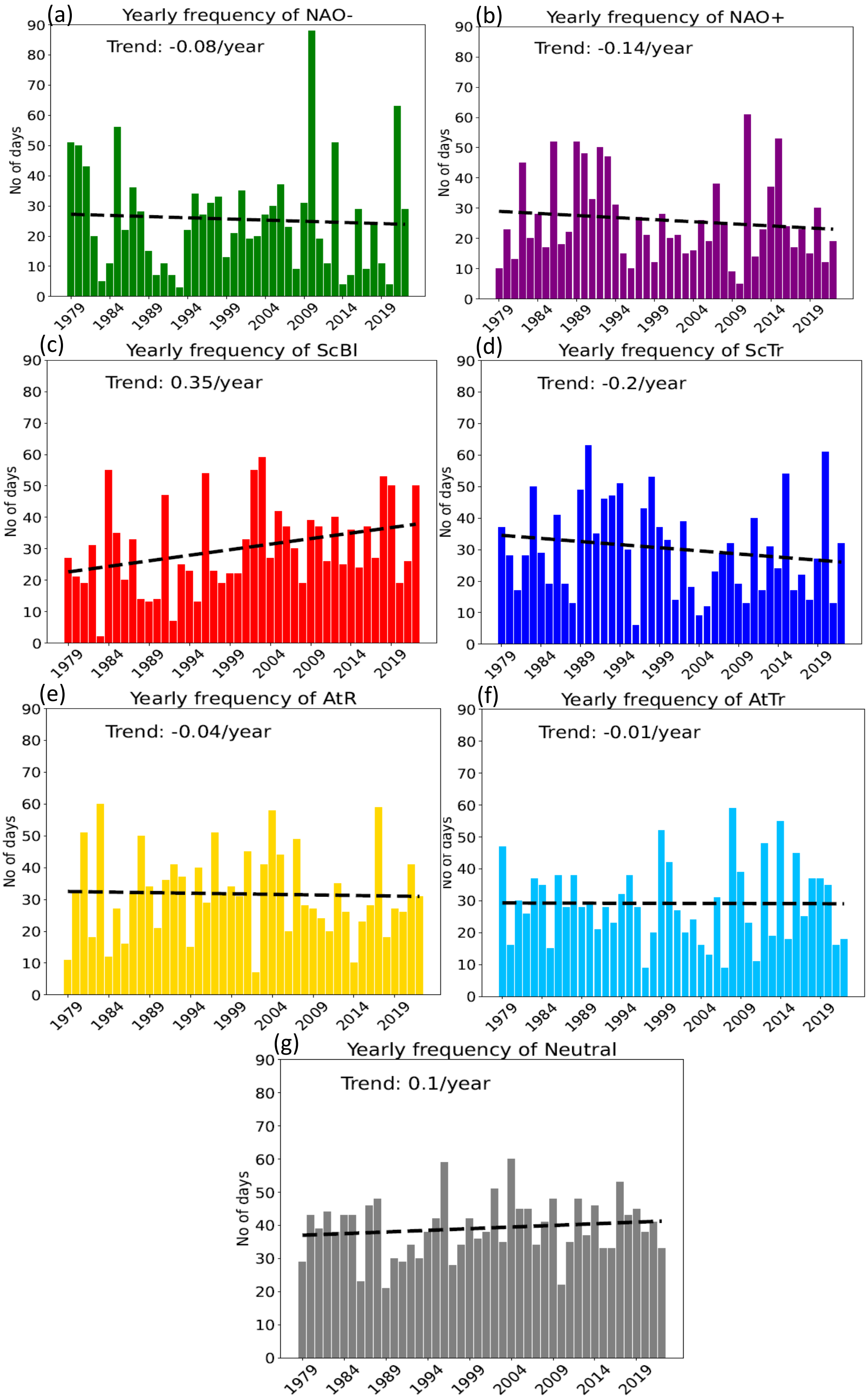

Figure 11: Yearly frequency of weather regimes during the period of 1979 - 2022. Dashed line shows the associated linear trend. The value shows the slope of the linear trend in days per year. Only the trend for ScBl is statistically significant at the 95th percentile.

This section underlines how different regimes impact different regions of Europe, with some regions experiencing colder and/or lower wind conditions. During winter, the colder and lower wind conditions are important drivers of high demand and high shortfall conditions (van der Wiel et al., 2019a; Bloomfield et al., 2020b), therefore these regimes can be related to high demand and high shortfall situations.

For most of these regimes, there is no apparent trend in frequency besides for the ScBl regime which has an increase in frequency. As it is related to colder conditions for a large part of eastern Europe, it would suggest (all else being equal) an increase in occurrence of these colder conditions and therefore an increase in high demand situations over these regions. However, as noted earlier there is a general decrease in high-demand conditions because of long-term warming.

c. Influence of weather regimes on energy days

In the following section, energy days and weather regimes are brought together by examining the relationship between them, to look at patterns across the continent.

i. Impact of weather regimes across Europe

The energy distribution is shown during the different weather regimes for each energy variable for Germany (Figure 12a to d). Only the distribution of wind CF (Figure 12b) and of energy shortfall during the ScTr regime is visually distinct from that in other regimes. For other countries with less installed wind capacity, even less of a difference between regime distributions is visible. For those countries, the other regimes are almost indistinguishable from each other, making any characterisation of the typical energy situation during each regime quite difficult. However, Figures 12e to h show the conditional probability of energy days during each regime, highlighting the information regimes provide for energy days. For example, the ScBl and NAO- regimes are associated with higher probability of demand days (Figure 12e). Thus, while looking at the full distribution is not helpful in identifying the influence of the different weather regimes, the focus on extreme values, represented here by the energy days, reveals their impact.

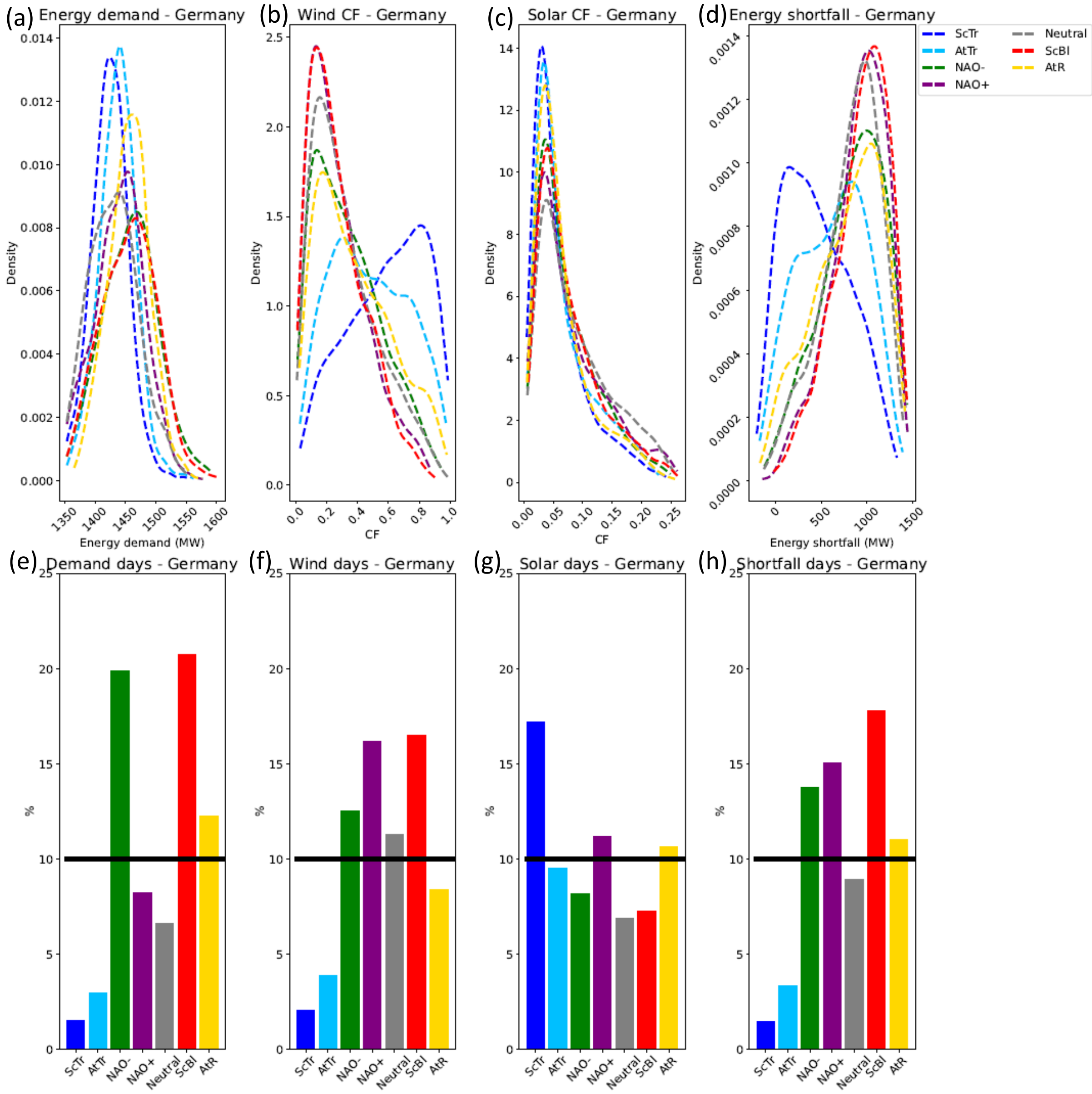

Figure 12: Energy distribution during each weather regime and each energy variable for Germany (a - d). Energy demand and shortfall are shown in megawatts (MW). Conditional probability of energy days during each weather regime (e - h). The black line shows the climatological probability of each energy day.

To identify differences between countries, the weather regime with the highest conditional probability for each energy day is shown for the individual countries on a map (Figure 13).

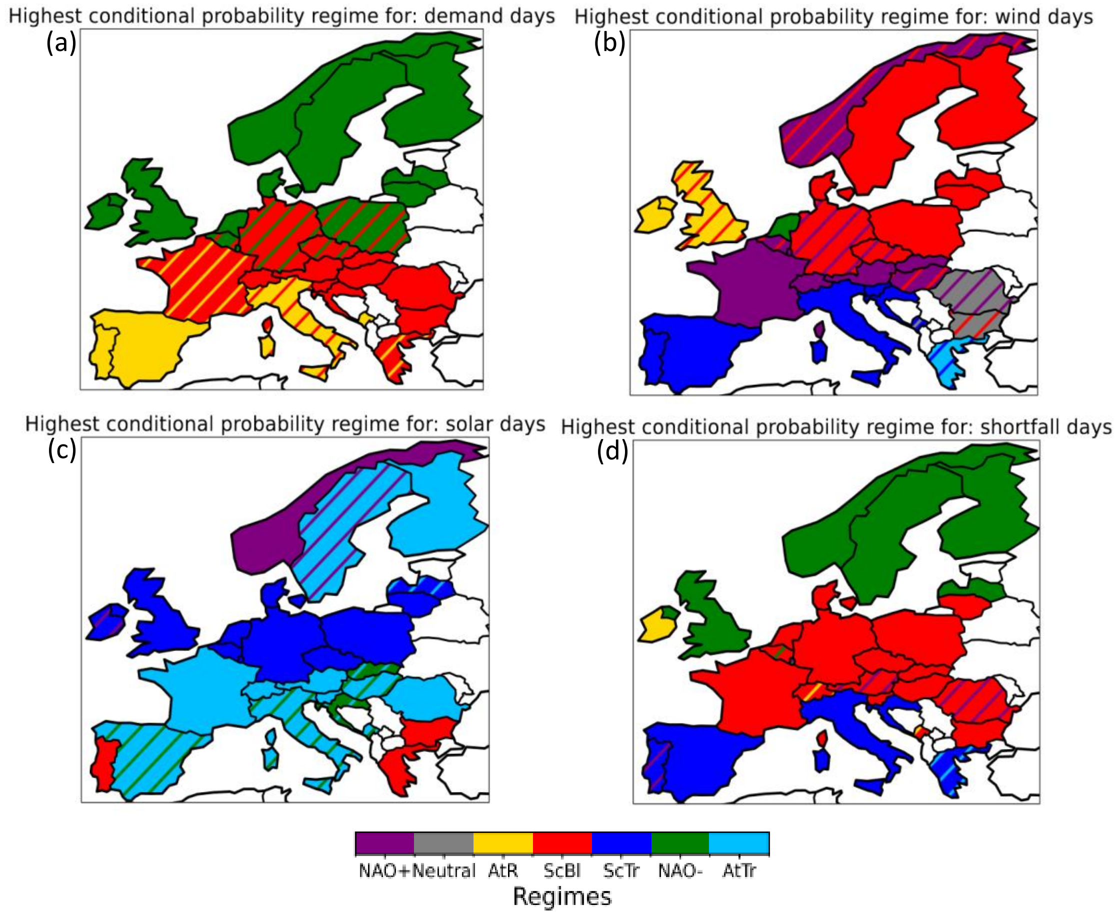

Figure 13: Regimes with the highest conditional probability of demand (a), wind (b), solar drought (c) and shortfall days (d) to occur. The stripes show also the regime with second highest conditional probability if it is within 2% of the highest.

When considering demand and shortfall days in particular (Figure 13a and d), Europe appears split. Scandinavia, Denmark, the British Isles and the Baltic countries all have the NAO- regime as the one regime with the highest conditional probability of high demand days to occur, while for most of central Europe it is the ScBl regime (Figure 13a), and for the Mediterranean countries and Portugal it is the AtR regime. For shortfall days (Figure 13d), it is a very similar situation with the notable exception of southern countries being more affected by the ScTr regime. Other regime classifications give similar results with blocking type regimes being dominant for most countries for demand and shortfall days (not shown). A notable difference is the European Blocking regime being more represented than the ScBl regime for high shortfall days for the classification with 7 regimes. Compared to the ScBl regime, the European Blocking regime’s anticyclonic anomaly is centred more over the British Isles and not the Scandinavian region.

Figure 13 suggests that when for instance the ScBl regime is active it is possible for a large number of European countries to be affected by high demand and shortfall days simultaneously. This raises the question of whether multiple countries can suffer from simultaneous high shortfall days, and if so what would be the impact on neighbouring countries and what are the atmospheric conditions associated with such situations. This question is addressed in the following section.

ii. Connected countries

The TSOs part of ENTSO-E are split into synchronous areas (ENTSO-e, 2009). These synchronous areas are groups of countries with connected energy networks, with the benefits being grouping of generation, common energy reserves and mutual help in case of a disturbance. In addition, countries are grouped into Regional Security Coordinators (RSC; Power regions, 2022). RSCs support TSOs through planning and recommendations, and help with coordination between TSOs that are part of the same RSC. The RSCs have been created to also address the diversification of energy sources, in particular the uptake of renewable energy sources. The RSCs considered here are COoRdination of Electricity System Operators (CORESO), TSCNET Services GmbH (TSCNET), Nordic RSC, Baltic RSC and Southeast Electricity Network Coordination Center (SEleNe CC). Only the Security Coordination Centre (SCC) RSC will not be considered as data for only one of the countries (Montenegro) is available from the dataset used here.

In the context of this study, the assumption is that countries within each RSC are well interconnected in their energy power systems. Currently the assumption of good interconnection might not be the most realistic as RSCs have limited power compared to national TSOs, and the export-import capacity is in some cases limited. For France and Spain it is currently at only 2.8GW. However, increase in interconnectivity between countries, and increase of power to RSCs is an objective of the European Union (European Commission, 2010; Electricity Interconnection Targets, n.d.). Discussing the outcome of common shortfall days given this assumption is thus relevant, given this evolving context. Therefore based on this assumption, if one country experiences shortfall, it can draw electric power from countries within the same RSC. However, if all countries or several within the RSC are experiencing a shortfall, this strategy might become difficult. Here the hypothesis introduced in the previous section that common shortfall days, that is shortfall days that occur at the same time in all countries of the same RSC, is discussed.

Figure 14 shows the Nordic RSC including the Scandinavian countries and Denmark as an example. Here all common shortfall days are averaged and the normalised demand, shortfall and the wind and solar CF are shown. Demand and shortfall (see Figure 13a and d) are normalised for each country for better comparison between countries, as otherwise the discrepancy between the demography of each country will obscure any signal. As expected, both shortfall and demand are on average high across all Nordic RSC countries during common shortfall days. Additionally, neighbouring countries also experience anomalously high demand and shortfall. In contrast, countries farther away and in particular countries south of the Alps and Pyrenees experience anomalously low shortfall and demand.

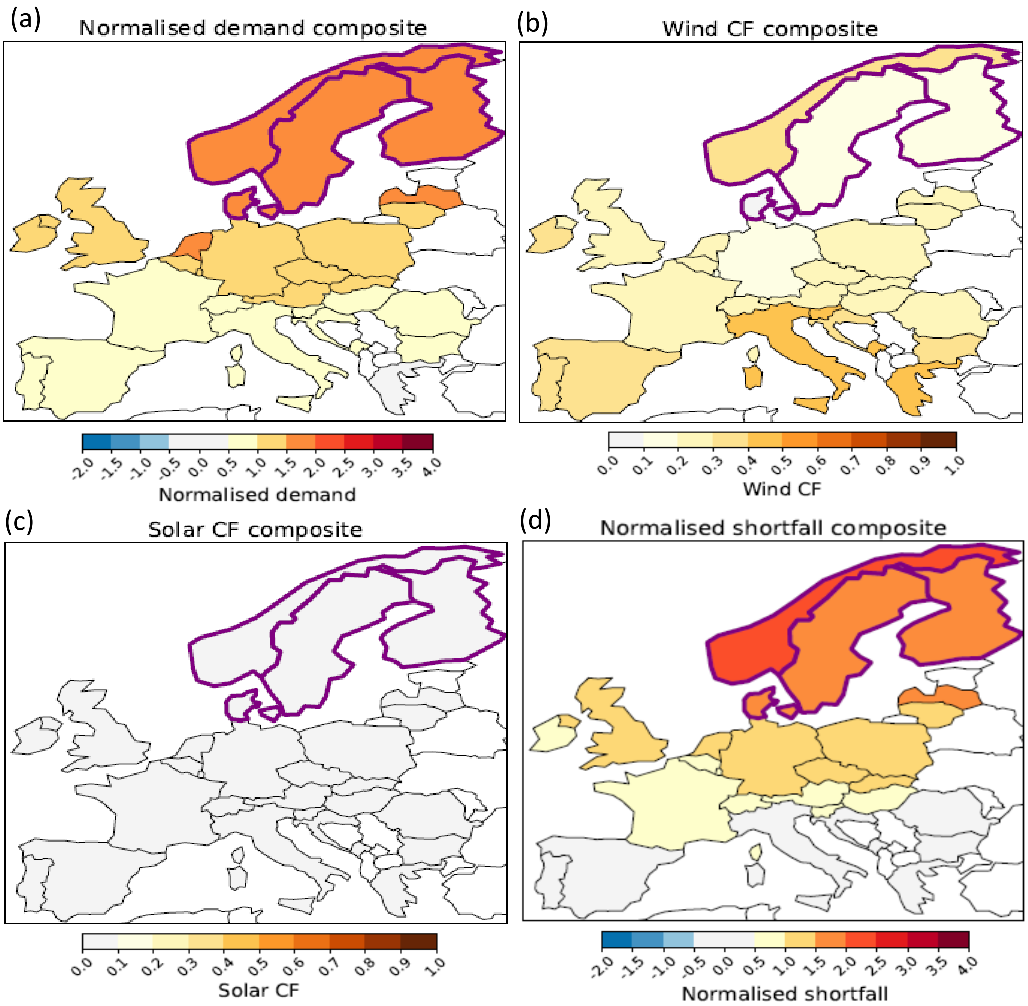

Figure 14: Energy composites during common shortfall days of Nordic RSC. Demand (a); wind CF (b); solar CF (c); shortfall (d). Purple contours show the countries that are part of the Nordic RSC.

Figure 15 shows the percentage of common days for each RSC which overlap with shortfall days in countries outside each RSC. In the case of the Nordic RSC, neighbouring countries are likely to also experience a shortfall day at the same time. However, countries which are further away and in particular south of the Alps and Pyrenees are less likely to simultaneously experience a shortfall day.

These observations are applicable to other RSCs. In the case of RSCs (Nordic, SEleNe) where all countries are north or south of large mountain ranges, the dominant regimes leading to shortfall are NAO- and ScTr which have a clear North-South difference in surface impact. This could explain the opposite impact on shortfall between countries in Northern and Southern Europe.

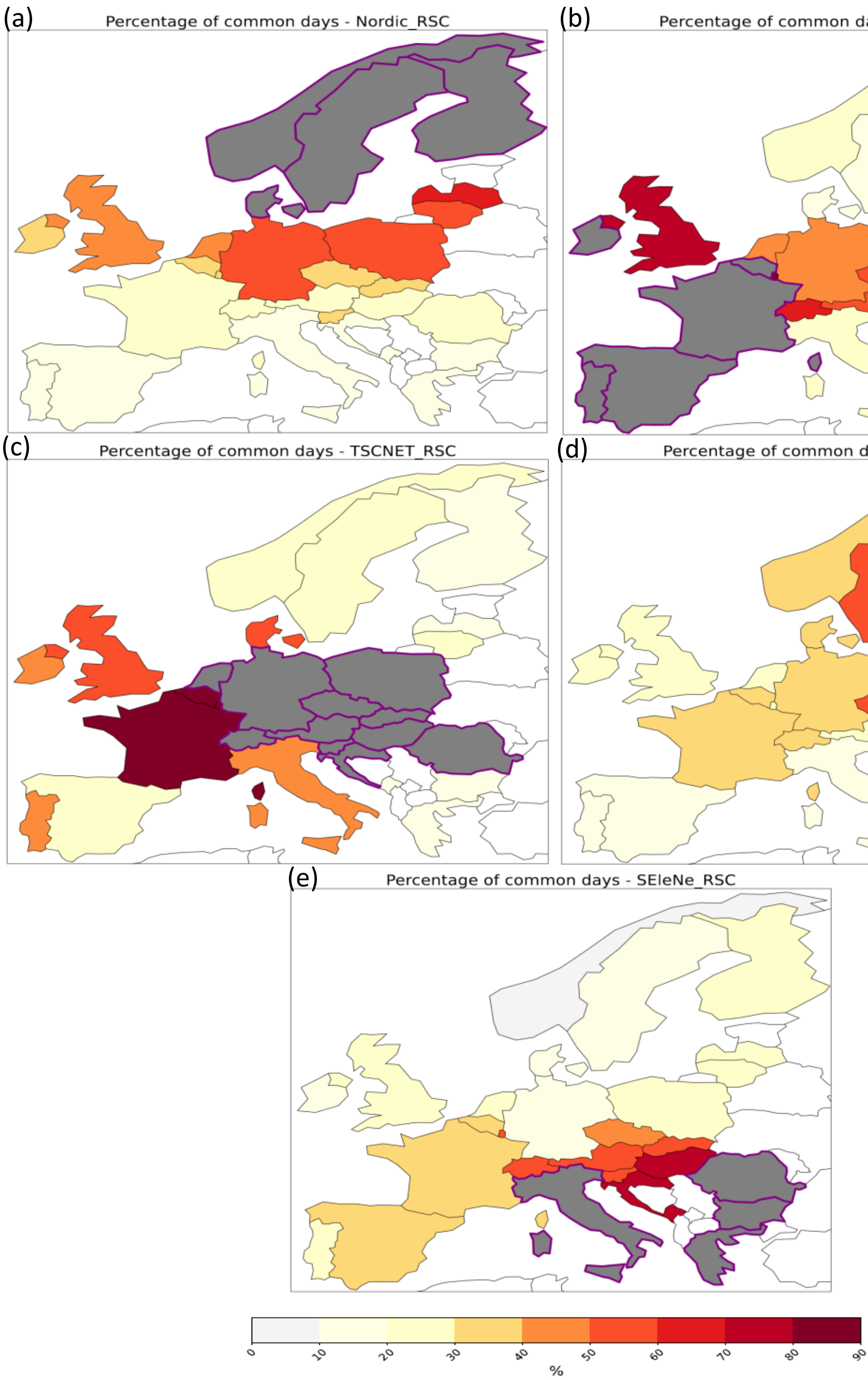

Figure 15: Percentage of shortfall days coinciding with common shortfall days of the Nordic, CORESO, TSCNET, Baltic and SEleNe RSC countries. Purple contours show the countries that are part of the same RSC. These countries are greyed out, as the percentages are 100% for these countries by construction.

This highlights how interconnections with neighbouring countries would not be as helpful in these situations. Furthermore, this puts further emphasis on the decision of the European Union to prioritise the expansion of energy connectivity across Europe through “European electricity highways” for instance (European Commission, 2010). The increased inter-connectivity aims to ensure security of supply but also better integration of renewable energy. This includes connections beyond the borders of Europe (European Commission, 2013).

Simultaneous shortfall days are also mostly associated with blocking type regimes. Figure 16 highlights that the most frequent regimes are ScBl, AtR and NAO- which are characterized by blocking-type atmospheric conditions. Only the SEleNe RSC, which includes Greece and Bulgaria, sees the NAO+ regimes being very frequent during common shortfall days.

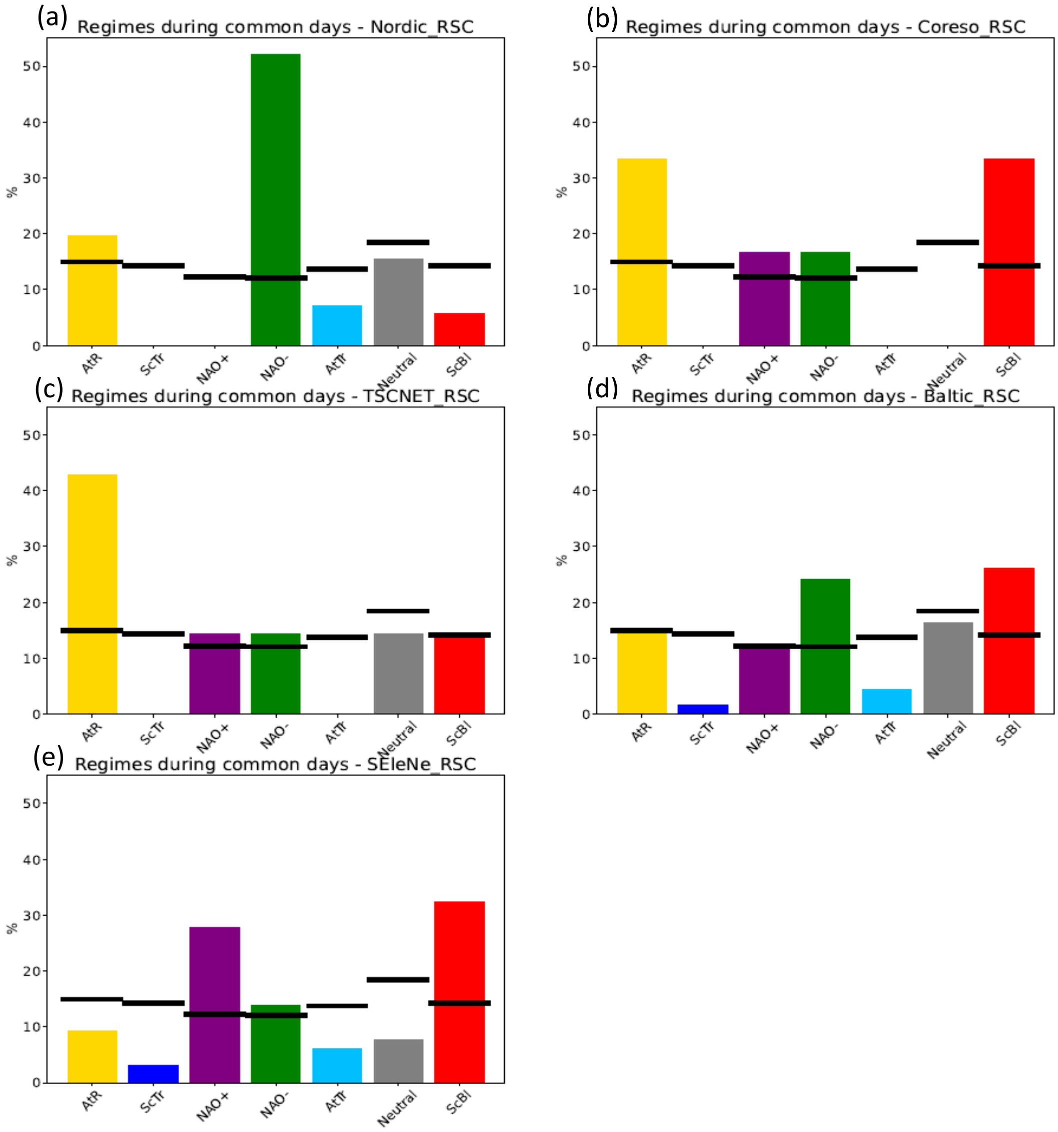

Figure 16: Regime frequency during common shortfall days for the Nordic (a), Coreso (b), TSCNET (c), Baltic (d) and SEleNe (e) RSCs. Black lines show the climatological frequency of each regime

The prevalence of blocking-type regimes is further emphasised by looking at Z500 composites during the common shortfall days (Figure 17), showing a ridge formed over western Europe for all RSCs. The exact position and extent of this ridge changes the area that is likely to experience colder conditions or lower winds and therefore dictates the countries that could experience shortfall.

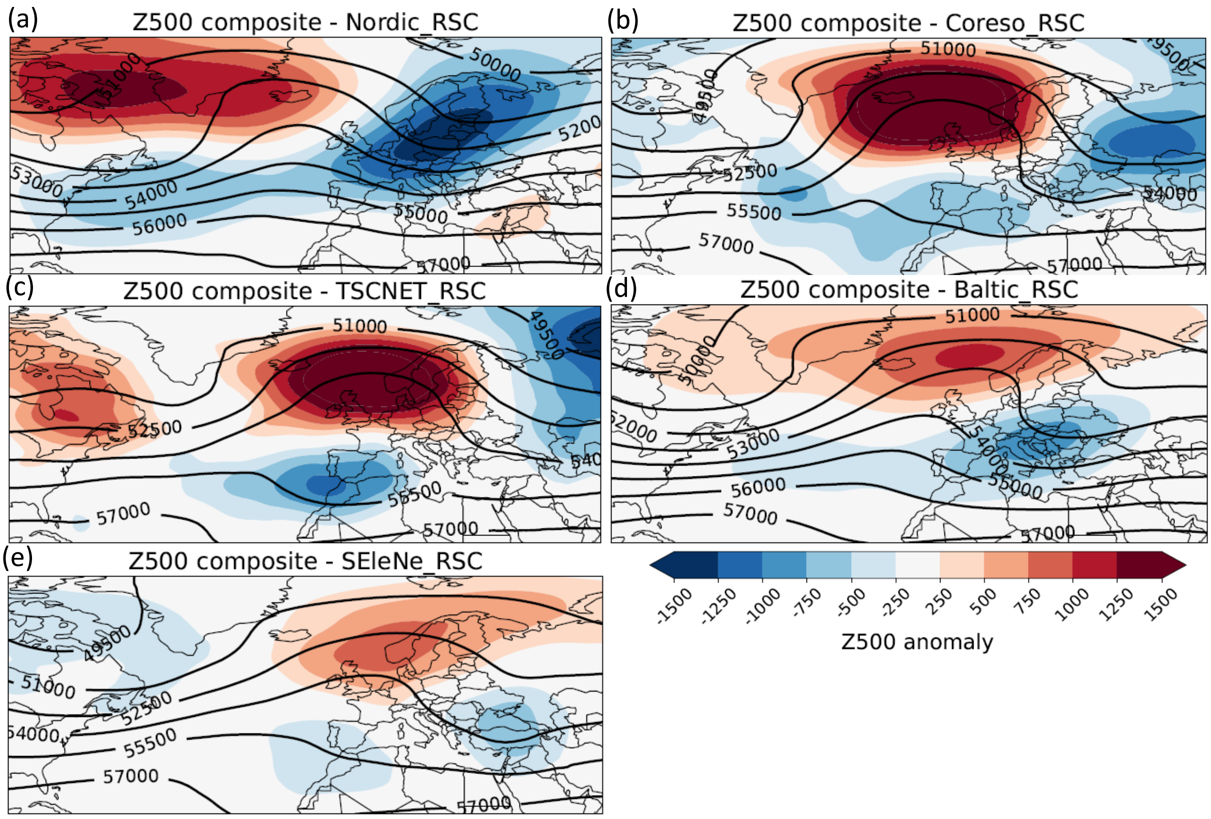

Figure 17: Z500 anomaly in colouring and absolute values in contouring for common shortfall days for the Nordic (a), Coreso (b), TSCNET (c), Baltic (d) and SEleNe (e) RSCs.

In section 3c.i individual weather regimes (e.g. ScBl, NAO-) have been observed to favour the occurrence of shortfall across large parts of Europe, and therefore multiple countries. The results of this last section confirmed the hypothesis that shortfall days could occur in neighbouring countries concurrently, and underlined how the aforementioned weather regimes are associated with these common shortfall days.

iii. A plausible worst case scenario: the example of winter 1962-1963

The winter of 1962-63 is known as the coldest European winter of the 20th century (Hirschi & Sinha, 2007). In the United Kingdom, snow fell the week after Christmas and stayed for most of the winter. Large bodies of water such as the Rhine river and Lake Constance were frozen. Temperatures dropped to -26°C in Vichy in France and below -40°C in Warsaw (Hiver 1962-63, n.d.). This resulted in severe impacts on human health, energy demand and the environment (Eichler, 1970). This winter was synoptically characterised by a strong and persistent NAO- (Hirschi & Sinha, 2007; Greatbatch et al., 2015). While such severe winters are becoming less likely due to climate change, similarly cold winters are still possible (Sippel et al., 2024). Considering this, investigating the winter of 1962-63 could show what a worst case scenario for the energy sector would look like, not only over a restricted region such as the RSCs seen in the previous section but across all of Europe. This analysis investigates the potential impact such a winter would have on the current (c. 2017) energy infrastructure.

As a first step, the winter of 1962-1963 is characterised by using composites of Z500, 2mT and W10m (Figure 18).

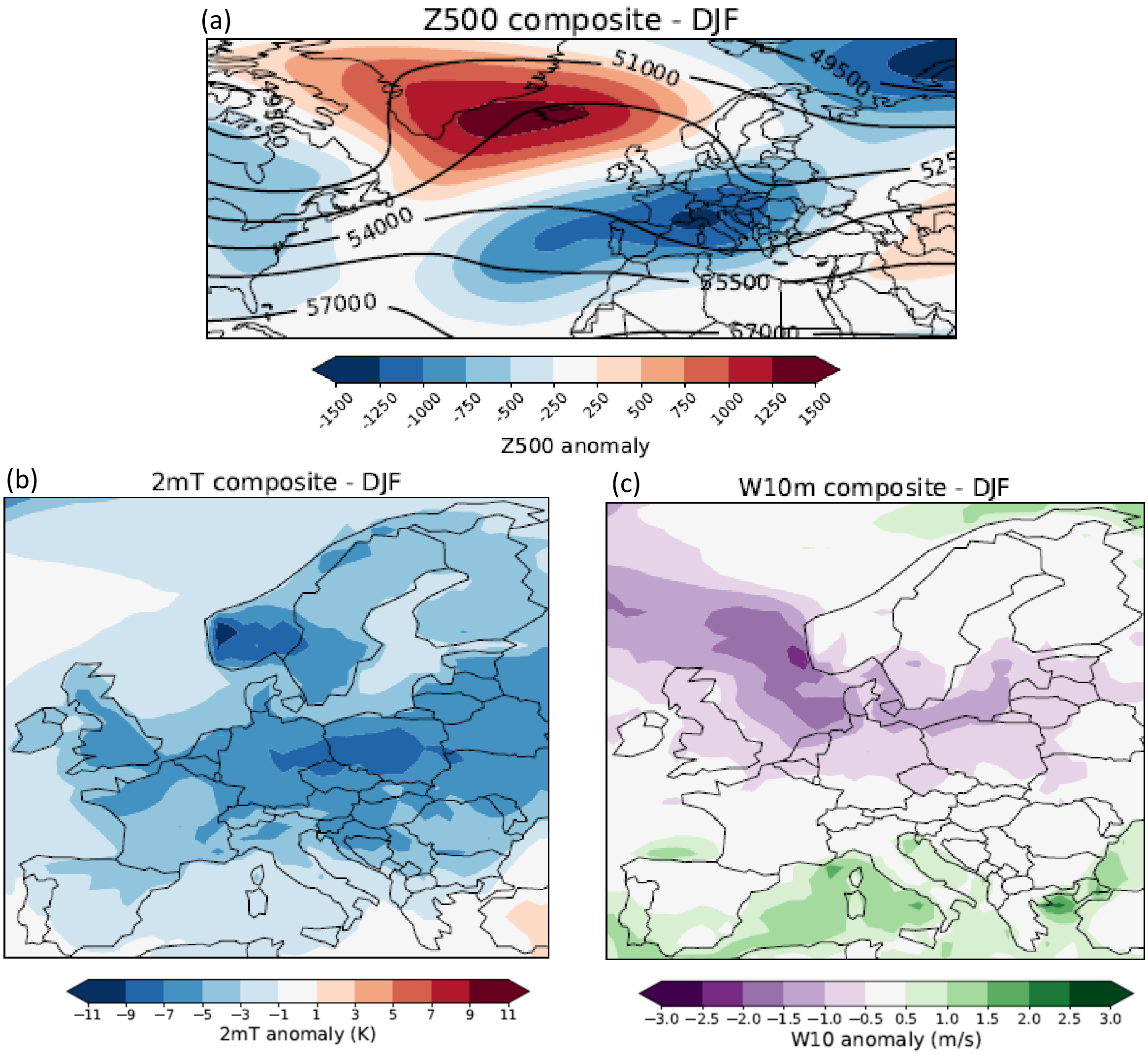

Figure 18: *Composites for December, January and February from 1962 to 1963. Z500 absolute values in contouring and anomaly in colouring (a); 2mT anomaly in colouring (b); W10m anomaly in colouring (c).*

The 2mT composite shows the expected strong negative temperature anomaly across all of Europe (Figure 18). The atmospheric circulation is characterised by a ridge over western Europe (Figure 18a), similar to that shown in Figure 17. Associated with the ridge, a negative wind anomaly covers the North Sea and parts of northern Europe.

The weather regime frequency during winter (DJF) shows the predominance of the NAO- regime (Figure 19), consistent with prior studies (Hirschi & Sinha, 2007; Greatbatch et al., 2015) and the ridge visible in the Z500 composite.

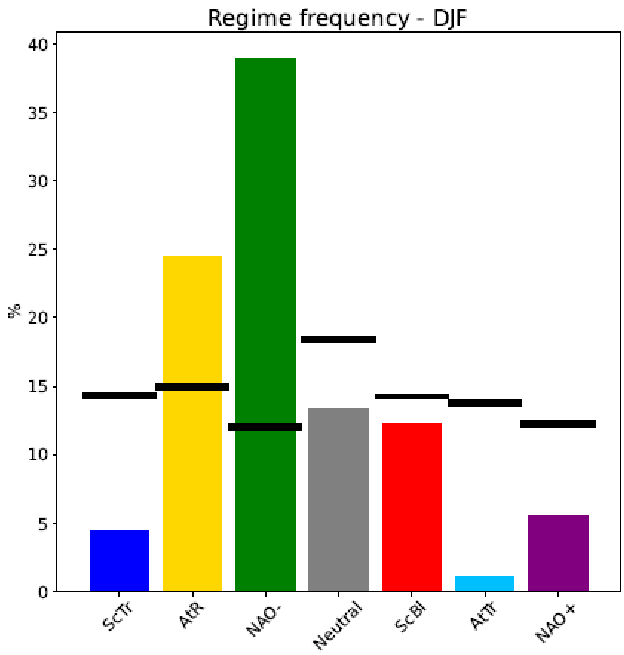

Figure 19: Regime frequency during 1962-1963 DJF period. Black lines show the climatological frequency of regimes.

We assess the effect on the energy sector if the winter conditions of 1962-1963 would occur under current energy infrastructure. It is important to note that the dataset used for this analysis (Bloomfield & Brayshaw, 2021) provides wind and solar CF only for 12 different countries.

The energy demand and shortfall in Figure 20 are normalised based on the DJF climatology (mean and standard deviation are done over the DJF period) for a better representation of seasonal variability. Across most countries, the demand is above average, in particular during the months of January and February of 1963 which were particularly cold (not shown). The energy shortfall shows a more contrasting picture with most countries (within this limited sample of countries) experiencing higher shortfall than the norm, but some countries show shortfall values more than 2.5 standard deviations above the norm. In particular Germany and Denmark have shortfall values of above 5 and 7 standard deviations above the norm, respectively.

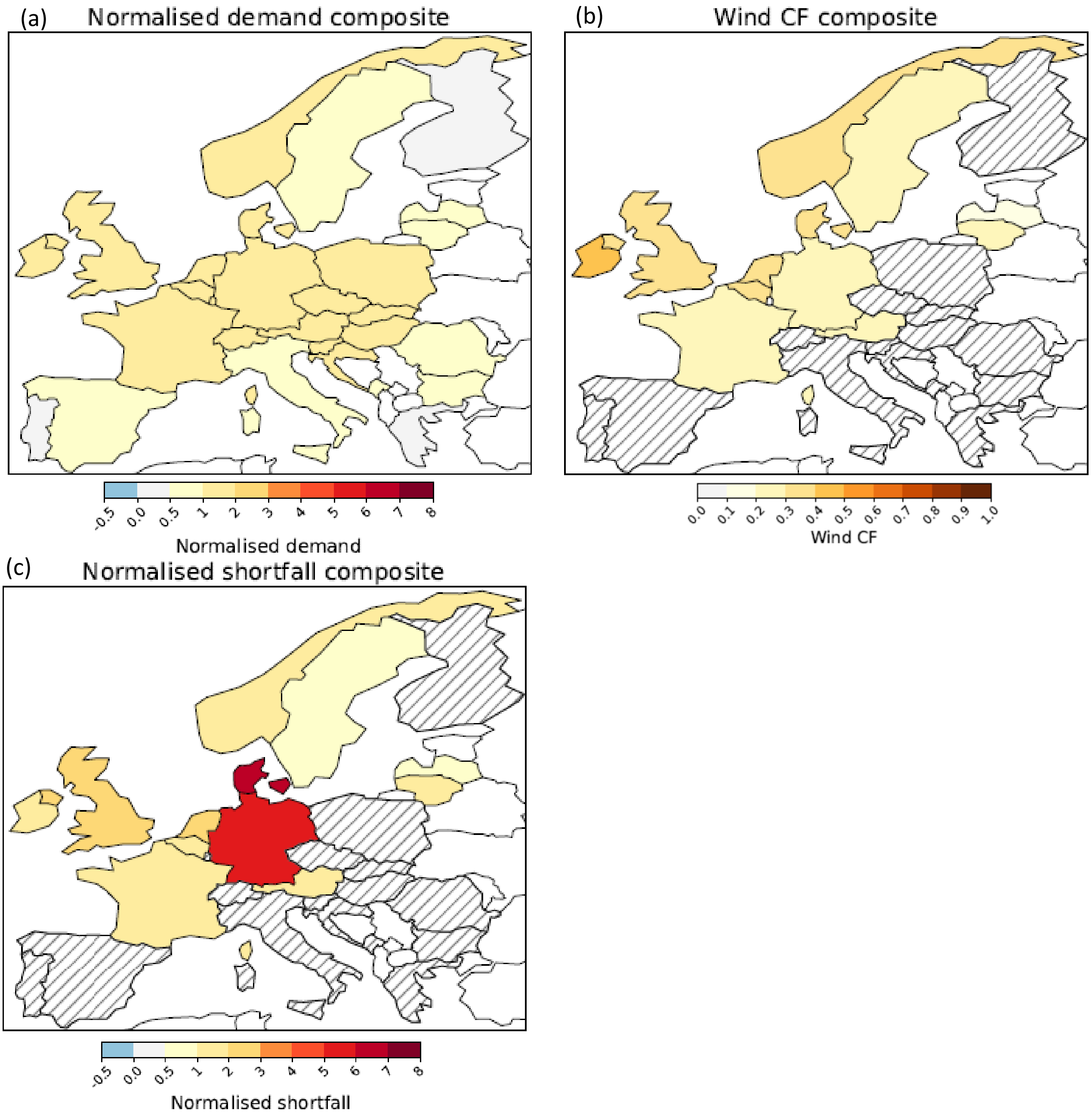

Figure 20: DJF energy composite conditions. Energy demand (a); Wind CF (b); Energy shortfall (c). Stripes in (b) and (c) show countries for which wind CF and shortfall data is not available.

The discrepancy can be partly explained by Germany and Denmark having colder temperatures already in December (not shown), additionally the lower wind conditions are localised more specifically over the North Sea which is the location of most wind farms for Germany and Denmark (see Figure 18). Additionally, both countries can in certain circumstances have more renewable generation than demand, leading to negative shortfall. This results in a lower value of shortfall standard deviation.

Further on, the number of demand and shortfall days is much higher during the 1962-63 winter compared to other winters (see Figure S19). For most countries demand days are at least twice as frequent, while for the Netherlands and the United-Kingdom they are up to five times as frequent as for a normal winter. Similarly, shortfall days were at least twice as frequent for most countries and 3 times as frequent for Norway.

This case study highlights how an extremely cold and persistent winter could affect the current-day energy network in Europe. All countries would experience large demand and shortfall, leading to an increase in extreme energy situations over a long period of time. These situations require the preparation and implementation of mitigation plans to limit the impact and reduce the chances of outages, but also to limit the use of more polluting or more expensive energy sources.

Additionally, as the large-scale atmospheric circulation was characterised by a very persistent NAO- regime (up to 26 consecutive days in December to January) together with intervals of AtR and ScBl regimes, this underlines again the relationship between weather regimes and shortfall for individual countries and across Europe.

4. Conclusions

The transition in Europe towards increased renewable energy generation, in line with the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019), requires a better understanding of the influence of weather conditions on the energy network. Indeed, renewable energy sources such as wind and solar are highly dependent on surface weather, making the balance between energy demand and energy supply more difficult to achieve with more components that can be affected by meteorological conditions (Bloomfield et al., 2016). In particular, periods of increased demand and reduced renewable generation, here called energy shortfall events, are crucial.

Several studies have investigated the influence of weather on energy shortfall using weather regimes (Mockert et al., 2022; van der Wiel et al., 2019b; Bloomfield et al., 2020a). In this paper, the relationship between shortfall days – days when the energy shortfall is above the 90th percentile – and weather regimes during winter is discussed for 28 European countries. This is done using data of energy demand, wind and solar capacity factors, derived from ERA5 covering the period from 1979 – 2019 with constant energy infrastructure set to 2017 and where each day is treated as a Monday (Bloomfield et al., 2020a). By keeping all network and societal parameters constant, it is possible to study the impact of only the weather conditions on energy demand and supply. Compared to real world energy data, this covers a significantly larger period, enabling the analysis of a large sample of weather conditions on the current energy network. In contrast to other studies which either focus on one country in particular or on Europe in general we provide a general perspective across Europe but also highlight differences between countries and their cause. Following investigation of weather regimes favouring shortfall days, we examine the possibility of simultaneous shortfall days for multiple countries. Additionally, we provide a perspective on potential worst case scenarios over Europe.

The first step consisted in identifying different types of extreme energy conditions, for which we considered demand and shortfall days which represent days with high demand and shortfall respectively; and wind and solar drought days representing days with low wind and solar capacity factors respectively. For conciseness the figures only show results for illustrative countries, but the statements are supported by an analysis of all countries (see Supplementary Information). We identified a decreasing trend in demand, presumably due to an increase in wintertime temperatures (Figure 1). A decrease is also perceptible for shortfall days, however it is less important and statistically significant for only half of the countries. The difference in shortfall trend between countries appears to be related to the relative dependence of shortfall to demand and low wind conditions. Countries with high installed wind capacity, or southern countries with warmer climates, have shortfall days that coincide more with wind days, while countries with low installed wind capacity, or northern countries with colder climates, have shortfall days that coincide more with demand days (Figure 3). As countries will be increasing their proportion of renewable energy, and therefore installed wind capacity, the relative influence of high demand and low wind days on high shortfall days might, as a consequence, evolve (Bloomfield et al., 2018).

Investigating the characteristics of energy events (consecutive energy days) depending on their duration showed that longer shortfall events also had higher shortfall, which is linked to generally lower temperatures experienced during longer shortfall events (Figure 5). Thus these events are particularly critical to the energy network.

In a second step, the influence of six weather regimes on the identified energy days was studied. A first important observation shows that some regimes, mostly blocking-type regimes (Atlantic Ridge, Scandinavian Blocking, negative North Atlantic Oscillation), favour the occurrence of shortfall days across most of Europe (Figure 13). Across the Mediterranean basin, shortfall days are favoured during the Scandinavian Trough regime (Figure 13). These results are consistent with previous studies (Bloomfield et al., 2020a; Grams et al., 2017; van der Wiel et al., 2019b). Further analysis showed that some regimes affect multiple countries over large parts of Europe, suggesting that shortfall days can occur simultaneously for multiple countries, putting many national energy networks under stress. By further investigating this hypothesis, this paper shows that if countries that are part of a Regional Security Coordinator experience coinciding shortfall days, the closest neighbouring countries are likely to also experience shortfall days at the same time (Figure 15). This underlines that, while increasing connections with neighbouring countries is generally beneficial, extending these connections to more distant countries and increasing energy storage capacity would help mitigate these scenarios. Again, these scenarios are favoured by blocking-type regimes (Figure 16 and 17).

Finally, a case study was performed looking at the coldest winter of the 20th century in Europe. The aim is to determine a worst case scenario, characterised by extremely persistent blocking regimes (Hirschi & Sinha, 2007; Greatbatch et al., 2015), that could be experienced by the current energy network. We show that most European countries would experience higher than normal demand and shortfall, with an increased frequency of both demand and shortfall days for all countries (Figure 20 and 21). Similar winters are unlikely but not impossible (Sippel et al., 2024), therefore an energy network more reliant on renewable energy sources needs to be prepared to weather these possible situations.

This study highlights how weather regimes impact countries differently, but also how their characteristic large spatial scale and temporal persistence can put large parts of Europe’s energy network under intense strain.

It is important to note that, throughout this study, modelled energy data is used with fluctuations being only due to weather conditions. This allows to get a clear causal link between meteorological conditions and variations in energy demand and renewable generation without societal and structural or confounding factors blurring the relationship. Furthermore, having a constant infrastructure enables the investigation of more than 40 years of weather on the same relatively current infrastructure. However, the counterfactual nature of the energy dataset used means that direct comparison with real-world energy data is not possible, which is a limitation of the present study. Comparing these results with real world data would enable to quantify the relative influence of weather conditions compared with other components (e.g. network constraints, infrastructure, behaviour).

There are a number of extensions to this work that might be worth exploring in future studies. While ERA5 is a very useful and practical dataset for this sort of study, using observational datasets or bias correcting ERA5 could be beneficial. It would also be interesting to examine changes to the energy network following 2030 targets and their impact on the conclusions of this study. This study focused on the winter half of the year; studying the summer period would potentially lead to different regimes being more relevant, solar days being more impactful and different trends in high demand or shortfall day frequency. Further, the methodology, such as the percentile thresholds, has been chosen to allow comparison between countries with large differences in both demography and infrastructure, and thus may lack the specificity that might be necessary to understand the relationship between energy and weather regimes for individual countries. Lastly, more complex models including storage capacity and interconnection between countries could provide an even more complex and thorough discussion around difficult situations to balance demand and production.

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Data Availability Statement

The ERA5 reanalysis (Hersbach et al., 2020) dataset used is freely available through the Copernicus Climate Change Service Climate Data Store.

The energy dataset was produced by Bloomfield et al. (2020b) and can be accessed here (https://researchdata.reading.ac.uk/272/).

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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