

# The Baltic Ring and BEMIP initiatives and their role in the energy security of Baltic states

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**Abstract:** The following paper treats about the initiatives of Baltic Ring and the Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan (BEMIP). Their main purpose is to integrate the electric grid in the states located at the Baltic coast and to eliminate barriers in transmission of electricity between them. This goal is notably difficult to achieve because of three different systems of grid functioning in the Baltic region – the Nordel system connecting Norway, Sweden and Finland, the IPS/UPS system common for all the post-soviet countries including Russia, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and the European system used by most countries of European Union. While the Baltic Ring at the moment of its creation was meant to be a plane for cooperation around the coastline of Baltic Sea, its noble objectives did not survive in the XXI century. The new incarnation of Baltic Ring, called Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan, does not even declare any will to cooperate with Russia nor Belarus. Its far-reaching goal is to desynchronize the electric grid of Baltic states with the IPS/UPS system and to connect them with the continental Europe. This plan is strongly supported by European Union and criticized by Russia. The main purpose of the following paper is to define the role of the European Union's energy policy in relations between Russia and the Baltic states. The European strategy for limiting Russia's influence is clearly visible in the area of electricity transmission. The Baltic states remain the most sensitive EU countries affected by that kind of influence, so that the BEMIP plan is focused mainly on enhancing their energy security.

**Key words:** Baltic Ring, energy security of Baltic states

## Energy security issues in the context of Baltic states

The definition of energy security is not unanimously accepted by scholars. This situation is caused mostly by differences in defining “security”, commonly understood as the freedom from threats. The scientific meaning of security and national security vary between research streams. For realists, the national security is identical to national interest and it may be defined by possessing resources to build a military power of the state, operating in the world of anarchy. Liberalist tradition provides the concept of international society and pays attention to bring the institutional stabilization in order to gain national security. For constructivists, the state's security is based mostly on the intersubjective perception of what the threat is (Degaut 2015).

The energy security concept is a derivative of national security and it also does not have one, commonly accepted meaning. However, most of energy security definitions include the notion of stability, which is the most desirable situation. Energy sector is crucial for the economy of the state as a whole, so that the continuity of energy supply covering the national demand is necessary to achieve, regardless of costs and financial profitability (Månberger, Johansson, Nilsson 2014).

As it was mentioned in the abstract, the Baltic states have their electric grid connected to the post-Soviet IPS/UPS system administered in Russia. This makes their foundations of energy security dependent on decisions made in another country. The state of affairs when a part of European Union's common market is such vulnerable of any external disruption is

unacceptable for the EU authorities. The current realisation BEMIP plan is an European response for these uncomfortable circumstances.

### **Establishing of BALTREL Committee**

The Baltic Ring initiative was started in 1998 with special financial support from World Bank and Scandinavian countries, and also the political backing in the European Union. Inauguration was held by 17 big electric companies representing 11 states, becoming members of the new body named BALTREL (full name: The Baltic Ring Electricity Co-operation Committee). The list of founder states includes all the ones with coastline on Baltic Sea – Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany and Denmark, and also Belarus as an important part of post-soviet grid system in the Baltic area called BRELL (from the first letters of countries: Belarus, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania). The most important common interest was to reduce the environmental and financial costs of energy transition and boost regional integration in the spirit of shared responsibility for overall economic good (ABB Review 2001).

At that time all sides were interested in economic cooperation. BALTREL was meant to integrate the electric grid between Russia with post-soviet area and the so-called Western countries. Baltic states were about to turn into a big energy transmission hub between the three systems. Especially Russia was interested to gain new possibilities of electricity exports (Zverev 2013). Moreover, European Union was also interested in diversification of energy supplies.

The BALTREL committee published its main objective in its Position Papers in July 2002. This publication states that the liberalisation of energy market is the key point for the Baltic Ring initiative. Authors criticize the monopolistic nature of electricity sector and see deregulation and competition as a necessity for the further unification. According to the paper, electric grid in all of the member states of Baltic Ring should be totally unbundled from states regulation and independent from any political pressure (Baltrel Position Papers, 2002).

### **European Commission and its policy towards the Baltic Ring**

In the beginning of XXI century, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian grid was fully dependent on the stability of the whole IPS/UPS system administered in Moscow. There were basically two types of electric lines – the 330kV and the 750kV networks, forming together a huge ring connecting Moscow, Smolensk (Russia), Belarus, Yantarenergo (Russia), Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Pskov (Russia), St Petersburg and again Moscow. Any disturbance in this ring could have caused disconnections in the whole system (Sauhats, Svalovs, Svalova 2003). This state of affairs was inconvenient especially for the Baltic states with modest amount of energy resources.

Nevertheless, geopolitical changes were about to come. In 2004 Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia joined European Union and NATO at the same time, clearly designating the direction of their policy. Also Russia was no longer ruled by the liberal and conciliatory Yeltsin administration, with Vladimir Putin as a new, strong leader with new vision of foreign policy. At that point Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia became a part of the European common market, which is one of the most important principles of EU. At the same time they became an only energy island in the EU, technically dependent on the external system administered by a non-EU power.

European Commission was never under any illusions about the free market of electricity and overall energy. Its publications and official stand shows awareness of the geo-political issues of this sector of economy. The official scientific paper of EC claims that the Baltic states have no need to be interconnected with Russia and Belarus because their dependence on electricity imports from Russia is not very high, however their grid should not operate as an “island” between the Russian and European network. Being dependent from Russia is clearly shown as a dangerous situation that should be changed in becoming decades (JRC Report 2016: 2).

Independence from the IPS/UPS system is believed to be the best projected scenario for the Baltic states in 2050. Estonia with its strong local energy production from fossil fuels is in the best position to gain this result. Also Latvia with advanced renewable energy production would probably be capable of supplying its electricity demand by itself. Lithuania would face the most problematic situation with big growth of energy demand and no nuclear plants nor domestic fossil fuels resources (JRC Report 2016: 14). So that, EC has decided to support the Baltic Ring initiative mostly for the Lithuanian interconnections – LitPol between Lithuania and Poland, and Nordbalt between Lithuania and Sweden. The European Commissioner for Climate Action and Energy, Miguel Arias Cañete, officially declared that there is no place for “energy islands” in European Union and the Baltic states have to be connected with the continental European network (European Commission Energy News 2015).

As it is officially stated by European Commission, the Baltic Ring initiative is not for improving the exchange of electricity between EU and Russia, but rather for the progressive and consequent detachment of the Baltic states from the BRELL area. In case of success, the Baltic states would be dependent on local production of electricity or imports from European Union, with no need to import electricity from Russia or Belarus. In 2021 this goal is still seen as ambitious and long-term project, however it is consequently continued. Nowadays, relations between Russia and European Union are harsh enough to declare it clearly as a project connecting the Baltic states to the Continental European Network. The latest declaration was signed in 2018 by European Commission president and the prime ministers of Poland and three Baltic states (European Commission, 2018).

### **ENTSO-E and the Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan**

ENTSO-E (European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity) is an European organization established in 2008 by 42 transmission network operators from 35 countries. The main declared goals of ENTSO-E are to make continental Europe the first place of climate-neutral energy production, and also to provide sustainable, well-secured and interconnected system of electricity supply (ENTSO-E Objectives, Official Website). Especially the interconnection is important in the context of Baltic Ring initiative.

The organization of ENTSO-E is not strictly limited to the European Union countries. It has got members also in the other European countries, just like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Iceland, Serbia and Switzerland, however actually there is no place for Belarus nor Russia in it, while the three Baltic states are included (ENTSO-E Member List, Official Website). This observation can lead to conclusion that the IPS/UPS system is not expected to become a part of interconnected system of electricity production. Operators of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia clearly declared their goal by joining the organization of continental European electricity interconnection.

The insight report of ENTSO-E from 2016 indicates that this state of affairs is not accidental. The desynchronization of Baltic states with IPS/UPS system is one of the most important aims of the organization. With support of European Commission and the prime ministers of Baltic States, ENTSO-E created the Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan (BEMIP) and finally launched it in 2009. Furthermore, a new declaration from 2015 signed by the governments of Baltic states confirms the objective of desynchronization with BRELL countries, and also expresses their will of implementing the European Energy Security Strategy (ENTSO-E Report from 2016).

The synchronization of European grid is not only a subject of political and business declarations, but is also a part of the *Acquis Communautaire*. The regulations for cross-border electric network synchronization, named the Network Codes, were mentioned in the Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009. Their main purpose was to create a plane for consultations between European authorities and the transmission system operators associated in ENTSO-E in the joint planning of the legal framework of electricity flows (Regulation (EC) No 714/2009: Article 6). The Regulation of 2009 was replaced in 2019 by the new one, confirming that the cross-border electricity transmission falls within the competence of the European Union, and also that the ENTSO-E is the most important agency in the decision-making process (Regulation (EU) 2019/943: point (42)).

The BEMIP initiative may be recognized as a successor to the Baltic Ring, but without the declared aims of cooperation with Russia and establishing the free energy market. The new plan stands unequivocally against the Russian interests in region, and it arouses enthusiastic reception in the Baltic states. However, the BEMIP goal is very far-reaching and difficult to achieve. Most of the Baltic states, excluding Estonia, have relatively weak domestic energy production sector and they are still very much reliant on the Russian fossil fuels supplies. Especially Lithuanian energy sector is in a poor condition and high level of dependence on electricity produced abroad. Lithuanian publishers are aware of this state of affairs and argue that European Commission should put bigger efforts to support their country in the process of reducing its dependence on Russia. Irma Paceviciute emphasizes that the initiative of BEMIP is nearly fully dependent on external sources of financing. The state of Lithuania has already borne the costs of building the LNG terminal on the Baltic Sea and the short-term financial benefits of this project are less than expected. If Lithuanian taxpayers paid for another far-reaching strategic project with no quick payback, they would probably express their dissatisfaction (Paceviciute 2017).

The most important issue for success of the BEMIP is the Lithuanian atomic energy. The Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in its official publication for OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) stands that there is no possibility to achieve the goals of BEMIP without reactivating of Lithuanian nuclear power plant. What is more, such a project would need a massive investment for adjusting the reactor to nuclear safety requirements, demanding a significant amount of money (Naudužas 2010). Nonetheless, the European Union has already allocated a big financial support for Lithuania in progress of decommissioning the Ignalina power plant, including the dismantling of turbines and support for the personnel. The common objectives of EU and Euratom for Ignalina, Bohunice (Slovakia) and Kozloduy (Bulgaria) nuclear reactors are to liquidate them completely. (European Court of Auditors 2016:

16). Planned budget for this project is at least 5,7 billion euro with possibility to even double this amount (ECA 2016: 72).

The common memorandum of the EU countries from Baltic Sea region, including the BEMIP countries and European Commission, Denmark, Germany, Poland, Finland and Sweden, was signed in 2015. Provisions of this document express the acceptance from European Union to build the new and safe nuclear reactors in the Baltic states and the Baltic Sea region as a whole. On the other hand, the closed reactors just like the Lithuanian Ignalina plant are not planned to operate anymore. The paper includes also a declaration of enhancing the renewable energy sector, nonetheless all the agreements in this area are stated to be voluntary and taking into account the actual capability of electric grid (European Commission Memorandum, 2015). In place of Ignalina old plant, it is planned to build a new reactor in Visaginas. There is a strong support for this idea in Lithuania but creating and implementing the project of financing and sustainable business model appeared to be harder than expected. Visaginas was projected to start operating in 2018-2020 (Grinevičius, Klevinskas, Koraliovas, 2009), however this objective is still far from realization.

The plan of desynchronisation of the Baltic states with the IPS/UPS transmission system is clearly expressed. It also corresponds with the financial and political support for them in providing the energy supply from non-Russian sources, such as the ongoing liquid gas transportation by sea or the planned construction of Lithuanian nuclear power plant. Those initiatives are not foreseen to be profitable. The lack of profits from investments held partially by taxpayers in the Baltic states, especially in the short-term perspective, causes mixed reviews of their policy. Maintaining the current situation of dependence would be much less expensive. However, the undisturbed energy supplies with no concern of external interference are seen as a priority by the Baltic states and the European Union authorities. This observations lead to the conclusion that the economic reasonability is secondary to the main goals of energy security.

### **Russian perspective of Baltic Ring evolution**

The Russian representatives took part in establishing of BALTREL. In the late 90s Russia under Boris Yeltsin rule was suffering from a disastrous economic and socio-political crisis. However, the Russian foreign policy was far more conciliatory than nowadays. The most significant example of this state of affairs was the green light given by Boris Yeltsin for Poland to join NATO in 1993 during his official visit in Warsaw (Milano 1998). The Baltic Ring initiative was expected to bring advantages for everyone at that time.

Since the BALTREL establishment everything changed. The new Russian president, Vladimir Putin, has took up a different strategy in relations with NATO and European Union. Russian relations with Baltic states were very difficult. Until the collapse of Soviet Union, most of the Russian energy transit infrastructure was located in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, so that after 1991 Russia was made to pay for exporting energy through its own installations. Putin as a president has put efforts to change this, and the Baltic Ring was seen as an opportunity to do it. In 2001, Russia signed an agreement with Baltic states about using the IPS/UPS grid system administered in Moscow. This agreement improved the Kaliningrad region security because all the connections between central Russia and Kaliningrad were officially linked through Belarus and Lithuania, using the same IPS/UPS system (Korovina 2013: 39).

The European Union's plans were slightly different from that. As mentioned above, European Commission was never interested in a free exchange of electricity with external entities, especially those with dangerous political ambitions. Baltic states are still the main point of interest but their planned role has changed from hub to a kind of buffer zone, isolating the European electricity market from Russian influence. This turn in the Baltic Ring is strongly criticized in Russia where it is seen as a geopolitical game of European Union (Zverev 2013).

Since the collapse of Soviet Union, energy exports were among the most important instruments of Russian foreign policy. Most of the soft-power and hard-power tactics of Russian diplomacy are focused on influencing the energy sector of neighbouring countries. Cutting of the supplies in order to punish a country occurred many times before, e.g. in 2007 for Mažeikiu Nafta (LT) because of signing a deal with Polish company PKN Orlen instead of Russian Lukoil, or the same year in Estonia in response to tearing down the monument memorizing the so-called "liberation" of Estonia by Soviet Union during World War II (Hanson 2013). Harming the continuity of supplies of energy sources is a substantial part of Russian range of tactics. The new incarnation of Baltic Ring, called the BEMIP, is an European response to this state of affairs. The BEMIP is limited to the electric grid operating, however there are more initiatives in the area of Baltic energy security, just like building of LNG sea imports terminal in Klaipėda (Lithuania).

According to the publications of the Russian origin, the evolution from previous ideas of Baltic Ring to the BEMIP is a negative development. I. Zeleneva states that the Baltics have to choose one of two possibilities – to be a buffer zone for the West or to be a bridge between East and West. The original project of Baltic Ring is seen as a constructive idea of integration, while the latest actions of the Baltic states tend to be more anti-Russian. The Russian solution of this dissatisfying state of affairs is turning the Baltics into "energy bridges" with strictly transit role for energy trade between Russia and European Union. Zeleneva mentions also that building the nuclear power plants in the Baltic states in frames of the Baltic Ring is consistent with Russian national interests (Zeleneva 2013). The growing securitization of European energy market is perceived by Russian authorities as one of the biggest threats (Romanova: 136).

## Conclusion

The BEMIP is recognized as a far-reaching strategic project with impact on entire European Union's energy security. It may also be found as an anti-Russian initiative. However, the EU policy towards Russia is not that unambiguously hostile in energy sector as a whole. Full implementation of the BEMIP would mean *de facto* detachment of Russian electric grid in the EU but at the same time occurs an opposite process in the fossil fuels sector. The pipelines of Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 have support from the European Commission, despite of their negative influence on energy security of Baltic states and Poland. The Baltic Ring and BEMIP plans are only a part of the bigger strategy of European Union as a whole. Sustainable and ongoing supplies of Russian natural gas are even more important for the EU than eventual worsening of Baltics energy security. The Russian Gazprom company has got partnership agreements with the biggest gas companies in Europe, just like ENI, Total, EON Ruhrgas and Wintershall (Salaude 2018).

The European energy policy is multi-faceted. The Baltic Ring/BEMIP projects which are beneficial for the Baltic states do not negate the effective Russian-EU cooperation in another branches of energy sector with detriment for the Baltic national interests. Nevertheless, the state of affairs could only get worse without the European Commission support. If EC did not help with financing of the BEMIP and the other projects in energy sector, the Baltic states would be unable to obtain even partial independence from Russian energy and electric grid.

It is hard to project the future of the Baltic Ring/BEMIP initiatives. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic outbreak and post-pandemic crisis may cause far-reaching changes in political decisions, especially in matter of financing large infrastructural projects. Energy as a whole sector of economy constantly experiences new shocks, mostly caused by the petroleum price fluctuations. Both European Union and Russia will probably suffer negative effects of the pandemic. However, perception of political goals and efforts from both sides to obtain energy security are not likely to change rapidly.

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