

Interview to Energetika (Translation)

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By Energetika Editorial Team

The key European organisation representing distribution system operators in the European Union celebrated its fifth anniversary this year. EU DSO Entity serves as an expert bridge between electricity distribution system operators and European institutions and is now preparing to expand its membership to include gas distribution system operators. Energetika spoke to Secretary-General Peter Vermaat about this development and other issues.

In mid-June, the European Commission gave you the green light to expand the organisation to include gas and, in the future, hydrogen distribution companies. What do you expect from this expansion, and how do you see the role of EU DSO Entity changing once it has been implemented?

I see two main directions for development. First, in our new role we will have a more integrated view of the energy transition and decarbonisation, as well as of the energy system as a whole. Second, I believe we will be more united than before and have an even stronger voice at European Union level. A broader membership base combined with greater expertise will give us more influence than we have had in the past.

There are therefore currently three main partners in discussions on European legislation – ACER, ENTSO-E as the representative of the transmission system, and yourselves as the single voice of all European DSOs. Is that correct?

Yes. It is very important to understand that our role is an institutional one. We have a mandate from the European Commission and are therefore the formal counterpart of various institutions. On the one hand, there is the European Commission, which means we have extensive interaction with DG ENER. On the other hand, there is the EU-level regulator, ACER. And then, as the counterpart to DSOs, there is ENTSO-E, the association of transmission system operators.

The mandate from the European Commission rests on three pillars. The first is to provide neutral technical advice on network codes and other regulatory matters. The second is to improve and develop cooperation between DSOs and TSOs. The third role within our mandate is to share knowledge among our members and with external stakeholders. These three pillars will remain unchanged in the future, following the expansion to include gas and hydrogen distribution system operators.

You celebrated your fifth anniversary in June. How do you perceive and assess the past five years? What influence has the organisation achieved, and what do you expect in the future?

Five years ago, we really started from scratch, but I think we have achieved very good results in two areas. First and foremost, I think it was important that from the very beginning we were able to provide the European Commission with high-quality input and reports on

technical matters. I remember very well the first network code on cybersecurity, which was launched just six months after we were established. The high quality of our work gave us a strong start. Later, we delivered the network code on flexibility, shared our knowledge and expertise on distribution network development plans, and worked on many other topics.

The second achievement is that we now have a platform bringing together almost all DSOs in Europe, making us a credible and strong voice for all our members vis-à-vis the European Commission, ACER and other institutions. We have achieved this thanks to the very good work of our 800 members, and I would like to point out that companies from the Czech Republic are also making a significant contribution. In addition, we have brought together around 200 technical experts from our members; they work on topics such as flexibility, cybersecurity and system availability data.

Looking ahead, I hope we can continue along the same path, supported by a more integrated perspective and a stronger voice.

Thank you for mentioning the contribution of members from the Czech Republic. EU DSO Entity has been very active recently, publishing numerous documents and launching many initiatives. One of these, which has also received positive recognition in the Czech Republic, is the Capacitypedia platform. Could you briefly describe what it shows about the situation of distribution system operators in relation to other stakeholders, and how satisfied are you with the results?

[Capacitypedia](#) is essentially an online portal that shows grid hosting capacity through the websites of individual members. It provides a very detailed overview for each DSO in each country and illustrates the capacity that is available or already being used. The main reason for creating the platform was to provide a high-quality overview of areas where capacity is still available and areas where it is more limited.

The second reason for having the platform is to share best practices on how to best present information on grid capacity allocation to users. And the reason why we are developing it jointly with ENTSO-E is very simple: grid capacity is not an isolated issue for either TSOs or DSOs. It is very useful to have both perspectives on the network, and sometimes it is also important to understand that the capacity of the distribution network is not constrained in itself, but by available capacity at higher voltage levels in the transmission system.

Another very interesting feature of the platform is that it helps users correctly interpret the information, because each country has its own definitions and approaches to calculating capacity. The website therefore provides a kind of guide to the information presented, helping us avoid comparing apples with oranges. Capacitypedia is now accessible and open to all members who wish to join and share their own capacity maps.

What does the published Electrification Action Plan mean for distribution companies? Is it possible to achieve such a high level of electrification in the EU by 2040? In the Czech Republic, there are some doubts about its feasibility, and we are concerned about the significant pressure the plan could place on network operators.

First of all, it should be said that our organisation welcomes the publication of the package, because it correctly highlights that electricity grids are a key factor in Europe's clean energy

strategy. We see that electrification is progressing more slowly than we previously expected. At the same time, however, we see network operators making every effort to accelerate electrification.

In practice, we will see what is achievable, but the first step is to set a clearly defined and measurable target. During its implementation, it is also important to avoid excessive regulation. So we should focus on implementation rather than developing too many new initiatives. At the same time, it is important to leave room for national implementation, because each country has its own trajectory. For DSOs, it is crucial that regulation is forward-looking and supports efficient investment.

An ACER report published in April this year concluded that some regulatory barriers, such as investment caps, are not the right way to further accelerate capacity development. DSOs are therefore naturally under pressure to make maximum use of available grid capacity while also optimising efficiency.

If we want to achieve the electrification targets set out in the plans, we need to be honest: **we need grid expansion**. In other words, we should combine grid smartification with further expansion of grid capacity.

You have mentioned several times the importance of cooperation between distribution and transmission system operators. How important is it for EU DSO Entity to promote a vision of, say, balanced TSO/DSO roles in the new European energy system?

Thank you for this question, which I consider very important. Ultimately, TSOs and DSOs are part of the same integrated system. So, we are not competitors; we are players in the same system.

For this reason, I believe it is desirable that we try to establish a common framework and a common vision for how to move forward. Every country has a different history in this respect. In my home country, the Netherlands, there is relatively good cooperation between DSOs and TSOs, but you should be aware that in other countries the situation is much more difficult. I hope that by creating an institutional platform, positive experiences with cooperation can be shared and extended to other European countries.

A very good example is the network code on flexibility between TSOs and DSOs that we have developed, which is highly useful at all network levels. There are other areas where cooperation is also very important, such as network planning. This is also why the Capacitypedia initiative was established, as well as another initiative providing a website on distribution network development plans, where we share the plans and make them available to TSOs.

Another area is a joint initiative engaging with the supply industry, because we all procure the same cables, transformers and other equipment. The future will bring much greater integration between TSOs and DSOs, so we need to jointly develop active system management.

Grid resilience is also a topic of considerable discussion. At the beginning of this year, you established a new working group focusing on resilience and cybersecurity...

For us, system resilience and reliability, both from a cybersecurity perspective and in an operational context, are very important areas in which we also cooperate extensively with TSOs. It is not enough to be resilient to climate change. What is essential is that, in the event of any kind of attack – whether physical, as we are currently seeing in Ukraine, or in cyberspace – we are able to restore system operations rapidly.

In this area, we can learn a great deal about cooperation between distribution and transmission system operators, for example from last year's blackout in Spain, where we saw that some things worked well while others were difficult to organise.

In your position paper on the Grid Package, you criticise the fact that most funding is directed towards transmission systems, while distribution system operators bear a significant share of the burden of the transition. If we look at the funding of European Projects of Common Interest, we see that these are mostly intended for TSOs...

It is true that TSOs generally qualify for these projects, which is partly related to the nature of their projects, which are often cross-border. However, the Czech German Gabreta project, for example, is also highly beneficial in terms of interconnecting distribution networks.

We are aware, however, that work needs to be done on the way projects are assessed to ensure that TSO and DSO projects are evaluated on an equal footing.

There is another aspect that is relevant to financing distribution network development. DSOs range from relatively small to very large, and it is not easy for the smaller ones to gain access to finance – not only through European support schemes, but also through bank loans or funding from private investors.

We therefore recommend working to reduce entry barriers for small and medium-sized distribution companies, for example through the European Investment Bank or other institutions. Our focus is therefore not only on grants, but also on conventional investment financing.

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