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“Democratic” supergrids

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The share of delayed projects for new electric lines has increased, partly due to public opposition, states the European Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators. Local communities involved ask for decision processes more transparent and inclusive Read more:

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Thousands of kilometres of increasingly sophisticated and cutting-edge transmission lines, in other words **supergrids**, are on the EU agenda. Projects for high voltage links between countries are already being implemented. But **works are often blocked or slowed down because of opposition locally**.

In general, the public have concerns relating to the impact on their health, environmental damage and loss in property value. These fears are, in most cases, fuelled by what's perceived to be poor consultation and communication about the positive effects of new electric lines, such as improved energy security and less emissions.

There are well-known cases of opposition. **Building the Spain-France electrical interconnection across the Pyrenees took more than 20 years** and the direct intervention of the former European commissioner Mario Monti as a special advisor, all because of citizens' resistance to new power lines through the mountains.

Another case is **the SuedLink transmission line**, needed to transport more electricity from the north to the south of Germany. Due to **opposition, particularly in Bavaria, the country has adopted a new law that obliges transmission operators to give priority to underground cabling, in a bid to boost public acceptance**. This means the SuedLink will be the first project of its size, over 800 kilometres, which will be predominantly buried.

The **European TEN-E Regulation (2013)** addresses these issues. "Indeed, the EU sets a framework for 'projects of common interest', which includes many **rules on how to better inform the public**. The obligations range from having a dedicated project website to developing a strategy for public participation and organising at least one public consultation before the official permitting procedure," expert Antonella Battaglini tells youris.com.

Battaglini collaborated with the BESTGRID project, which aimed to promote public participation in grid development processes: "We could see, from working together on several levels, it really made a difference. This ranged from European **exchanges between consortium partners to cooperation between local NGO groups and grid operators**."

In Italy, the modernisation of the SACOI (Sardinia-Corsica-Italy) link is underway. It is a strategic cable at the centre of the European project BEST PATHS. "We are starting a series of consultations with the local institutions and communities involved to promote as much as possible the technologies that are most sustainable for the environment and the community", says Terna, which runs national high voltage grids in the country and is part of the project.

The definition of "projects of common interest" relates to projects that contribute to the integration of electric energy markets in the EU, improve the security of energy supply, increase production from renewable energy sources and reduce CO2 emissions.

The Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER) states that **31 percent of the projects of common interest are delayed, while 14 percent are being re-worked**. The main reasons are national law changes, uncertainty of regulatory decisions and public protests.

"The common ('public') interest is already defined at the planning level, where **the public does not have sufficient possibilities to participate**," writes environmental lawyer Birgit Schmidhuber, who led a legal analysis on the TEN-E Regulation. "Then at the project level mostly no criticism is tolerated, as the overall decision has been taken before. The public – at least the affected public – should have the possibility to raise interests which are notoriously under-represented (...) such as environmental or health concerns."

"It would be highly welcomed if the identification of projects of common interest would achieve a high standard of public participation, through adequate instruments and a broad stakeholder dialogue as foreseen by the Aarhus Convention [ed. Note: UN Convention on public participation in decision-making and on access to information in environmental matters]," she adds.

A "streamlined public consultation" is always needed," underlines Marcelo Masera, head of the European

Commission's Energy Security Unit and one of the authors of the report "Evolution, opportunities, and critical issues for pan-European transmission." Moreover it is necessary **to set out a maximum temporary limit for the permit process**, since "the time required to get permits for grid facilities is generally much longer than the time needed to build new power plants."

"A national 'one-stop shop for permit granting' should be also established. The **companies that are part of the project must have one - and only one interlocutor throughout the entire process**," explains Masera. Having multiple points of contact fuels bureaucracy and generates inconsistency in the processes.

Creating supergrids in Europe is a radical step forward in helping to secure our future energy supply. And, while there has been some opposition to their development, improved communication and consultation will help to smooth the way for their continued expansion.

By Elena Veronelli