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Biogas pipes in Strasbourg, France | Patrick Hertzog/AFP via Getty Images

Q and A with Jean-Marc Leroy, president of Gas Infrastructure Europe

He argues the EU shouldn't ignore gas in its drive to cut carbon dioxide emissions.

By **ANCA GURZU** | 6/13/18, 4:24 PM CET

Europe's gas lobby is fighting hard for a good-enough solution to the greenhouse gas emissions problem.

The drive to go electric is grabbing headlines, but the gas industry argues that natural gas is much cleaner than coal and oil, and that biogas, generated from waste, is a green fuel — so it should share market with electricity.

“If we want to have quick results on CO₂ emissions in Europe, the solution is gas,” Jean-Marc Leroy, the president of Gas Infrastructure Europe (GIE) and senior executive vice-president for external relations with Engie, the French utility, told POLITICO in Brussels.

Environmentalists complain that investing in gas infrastructure doesn't make sense as the long-term future will be dominated by electricity, but the European gas sector

doesn't agree.

"There are some people very simply thinking the solution is having everything electric. But it won't be to the benefit of customers because it will be too expensive," Leroy said. He also talked about Europe's energy transition, the role of gas, and spending on big infrastructure projects.

There is a strong push to electrify the EU's energy system. What challenges does that pose for gas operators?

There are some people very simply thinking the solution is having everything electric. But it won't be to the benefit of customers because it will be too expensive. In France, if you look at the peak of electricity in the winter, it is 100 gigawatts. For gas, it's double. If you get rid of that, how can you manage to ensure security of supply and heating for consumers, and what will be the cost for that? You will have to dramatically develop electricity networks, from distribution to production. And this network will be used only a few days a year.

When I listen to people advocating for all-electric solutions, these people are not considering the new dependencies this will bring. To develop these kinds of solutions you need to massively import new metals, new rare earths for storage, for batteries. In the gas business we are trying to develop less dependency thanks to green gas solutions.

Are you making the case for gas?

I'm not advocating for gas, I'm advocating for a balanced energy mix for Europe. Once you have the gas network already there, it can be used efficiently. I'm sure electricity storage will develop and costs will come down but not in such a proportion to ensure security of supply. We have to explain that we will need gas because gas will also be renewable.

Do you still see a role for natural gas or will it shift to biomethane and other forms of gas?

We are beginning a transition. I don't think we can go from 100 percent one thing to 100 percent another thing just like that. If we want to have quick results on CO2 emissions in Europe, the solution is gas. If you want to improve the air quality, you need to develop a mix between electricity-powered cars and gas-powered cars, but also hydrogen. Gas can be easily stored, which is not the case for electricity. Gas is very competitive as well: 1 kilowatt of gas is four times cheaper than electricity.

How is the work of your organization and members changing because of the energy transition?

The transition for gas operators is from distributing energy to a more collaborative way of managing energy. It's a new phenomenon. You will sometimes produce more biomethane locally than the consumption needs so you will need to find a solution for this biomethane and the solution is to have it in the transmission network and have it stored.

How is this shift looking across Europe?

Historically, the starting point for countries was not the same. [In Western Europe] it is quite normal to see a more advanced and interconnected market. There is still some work to be done to have the same effect in the southern part of Europe, not forgetting there are also some countries knocking at the door to enter the community. Developing interconnectors with these countries is key for a smooth integration in the future.

Should the EU spend money on projects like the Midcat pipeline between Spain and France if there are questions about their economic viability?

If the question is whether this infrastructure will not be economically viable, then there's the question whether you decide to go ahead for political reasons, for diversification and so on. It's good for democracy not to keep the key in any of the two groups' hands. At the end, what's at stake is the interest of the final consumer.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.