

EU Energy

EU must curb Russian gas supply to avoid being ‘held hostage’

Belgian energy minister warns that bloc should wean itself off fossil fuel imports from Moscow by 2027

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— BRUSSELS

Belgium’s energy minister has urged the EU to curb imports of Russian gas by weaning itself off fossil fuels after a report showed that her country was among the world’s biggest recipients of liquefied natural gas thanks to its status as a transit hub.

Tinne Van der Straeten told the Financial Times it was “absolutely necessary” that the bloc met its goal of weaning itself off Russian fossil fuels by 2027 to prevent it “being held hostage” by Moscow.

According to figures analysed by Global Witness, the NGO, the EU is set to import record volumes of liquefied natural gas from Russia this year as part of its effort to diversify away from piped supplies, which have been steadily cut by Moscow following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine last February.

Belgium is the third-biggest importer of Russian LNG globally, taking 17 per cent of the country’s exports of the fuel, behind only China and Spain, Global Witness said.

Russia has become the bloc’s second-biggest supplier of LNG after the US, with its exports accounting for 16 per cent of the EU’s supplies between January and July, figures from industry data company Kpler showed.

Van der Straeten said she was “not happy with the fact that Russian LNG is still flowing into the EU and through Belgium”. She noted that only 2.8 per cent of the imports went to Belgian consumers while the rest transited to

other countries.

The Belgian port of Zeebrugge is a major hub for the transshipment of LNG. Germany and the Netherlands were among those importing the fuel from Belgium, Van der Straeten said.

The level of Russian LNG imports has raised questions over whether Brussels should impose sanctions on the fuel, as it has for Russian crude oil and certain petroleum products. EU officials have said discussions on this could be held in future but that more work needs to be done to find alternative energy sources.

Kadri Simson, the EU’s energy commissioner, said in March that the bloc “should get rid of Russian gas completely as soon as possible, still keeping in mind our security of supply”.

Belgium supported imposing sanctions on the fuel, Van der Straeten said. But such a move was unlikely as it required the support of all EU countries, she added.

“The most effective thing that we can do . . . is to wean ourselves off fossil fuels in general and make sure . . . that we can control energy ourselves,” she said.

The Green politician was speaking ahead of the opening in Belgium of the EU’s first major thermal battery installation, a means of capturing heat from solar power and storing it for use on demand rather than relying on the weather.

The project at adhesive manufacturer Avery Dennison’s plant in the Belgian city of

Turnhout is part funded by the Flemish regional government and Brussels. It will allow the company to cut annual gas use at the factory by 9 per cent on average, the company said. It could totally replace gas during the hottest months.

The technology is seen as a way for heavy industrial users to cut their fossil fuel use without relying on more expensive systems such as renewable hydrogen or carbon capture that require much larger infrastructure networks.

“Depending on where you are in the world, this can already be [cost] competitive with gas,” said Christian Thiel, chief executive of Norwegian company Energynest, which designed the project.

Thermal battery projects are also being established in the US. The mining company Rio Tinto and petroleum producer Saudi Aramco are among those that recently invested in a \$60mn funding round for Californian start-up Rondo Energy, which is piloting its own thermal battery technology.

Avery Dennison and Energynest did not disclose the overall investment for the Belgian project but said the EU had given €1.43mn in funding to support 70 per cent of the thermal battery component.