



Christian Ehler

Chief Spokesman on Energy, Industry and Research for EPP Group
European Parliament

Repurposing Existing Gas Infrastructure Makes Hydrogen Viable

In order for heavy vehicles to run on hydrogen, they need a hydrogen highway, meaning a chain of hydrogen-equipped filling stations and other infrastructure along a highway which allow hydrogen vehicles to travel. Behind these hydrogen stations, another layer of hydrogen infrastructure would be needed; namely the hydrogen pipeline transport and points of hydrogen production for distribution. And yet, none of this is available, or if it is, it is not anywhere near a fully-fledged market. So how do we go about putting this technology on the market? For starters, we need to acknowledge that the existing gas infrastructure can be used for hydrogen. Hydrogen is viable only if we repurpose the existing gas infrastructure to carry hydrogen instead. However, the EU Commission wants the EU hydrogen network operators to unbundle their production and supply activities. What this means is that hydrogen network operators would have to be legally and structurally independent from companies involved in the transmission or distribution of natural gas or electricity. The transmission systems operators for electricity or natural gas would not be able to act as hydrogen network operators.

Indeed, these unbundling ideas will hinder, rather than help us reach our final goal of allowing hydrogen to become a key component of the energy sector. My office has received many queries about this, mostly expressing concern, not least because this creates more burdens for operators, and it will make the integration of hydrogen in the existing gas grid harder and longer. There is no doubt that the EU Commission had good intentions but under the current circumstances, its approach will not fly, for the simple reason that it slows down the process and it is not the most cost-effective way. These ideas seem to be rooted in the past, with an ideological underpinning rather than driven by an authentic understanding of the present needs. Unbundling rules have to facilitate the efficient use of expertise and services from transmission system operators who are entrusted with the transport of energy, by allowing different vertical unbundling models across the EU, as is the case with the natural gas models. We need to establish an integrated energy system planning of hydrogen, natural gas, and electricity infrastructure. ■

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