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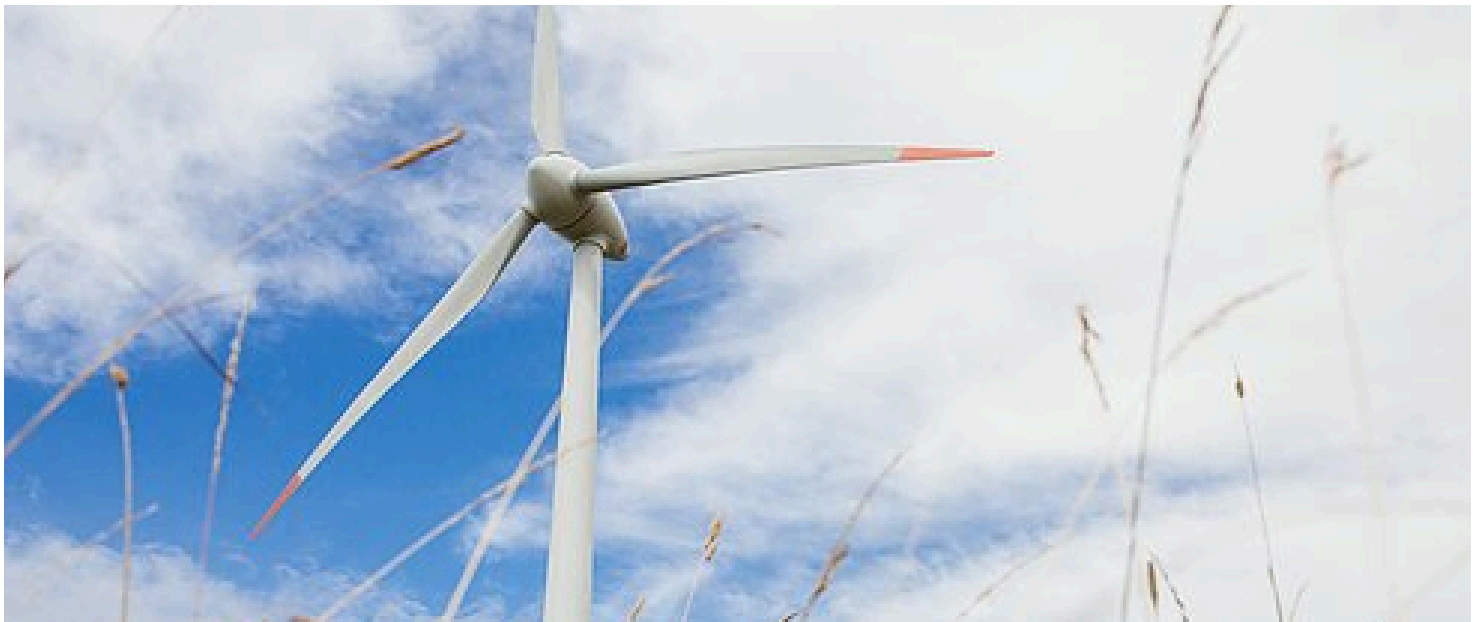


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Wind turbine | Photo by J. Stacevičius / LRT

Business 2025.03.12 05:30

US energy expert: if you had stayed in BRELL, it would have been much easier for Russia

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**Vaida Kalinkaitė-Matuliauskienė, LRT.lt**

Europe is not energy secure and there are no quick fixes to change that, says Thomas O'Donnell, an American energy and geopolitical strategist and fellow at the Wilson Center in Washington. He calls for greater diversity in energy sources and not relying solely on renewable energy, which makes Europe even more dependent on gas, and therefore on Russia.



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Interviu trumpai

- Nustatyti, kodėl buvo rengiamos s jūroje gali būti neįmanoma – galėj konkrečios vietos arba rengiami b
- Jeigu Lietuva ir kitos Baltijos šalys žiede, Rusijai būtų lengviau manip
- Lietuvą Vokietija kritikavo dėl SGD jiems teko pripažinti, kad Lietuvos įgyvendintas šauniai.

– At the beginning of February, we were still part of the BRELL ring. Now we have disconnected from it and synchronized with continental Europe. Before that, we even had several cases of cable sabotage in the Baltic Sea.

– The nature of such attacks is such that their organizers do not claim responsibility for them (although in this case we are fairly certain it is the Russian Federation) and they do not say why they are doing it, so we are left to speculate.

I've heard about three different versions. One of them is to go back a little. The Baltic countries already have connections with Sweden and Finland. So obviously, when the cables were cut, there was a fear that the Russians could cut these cables or other communication cables and thus sabotage, disrupt your new synchronization zone. Of course, this zone is not only yours, it is connected to the European Union (EU).



Thomas O'Donnell | Photo from the Warsaw Conference "Energy Security in Central and Eastern Europe" 2024.

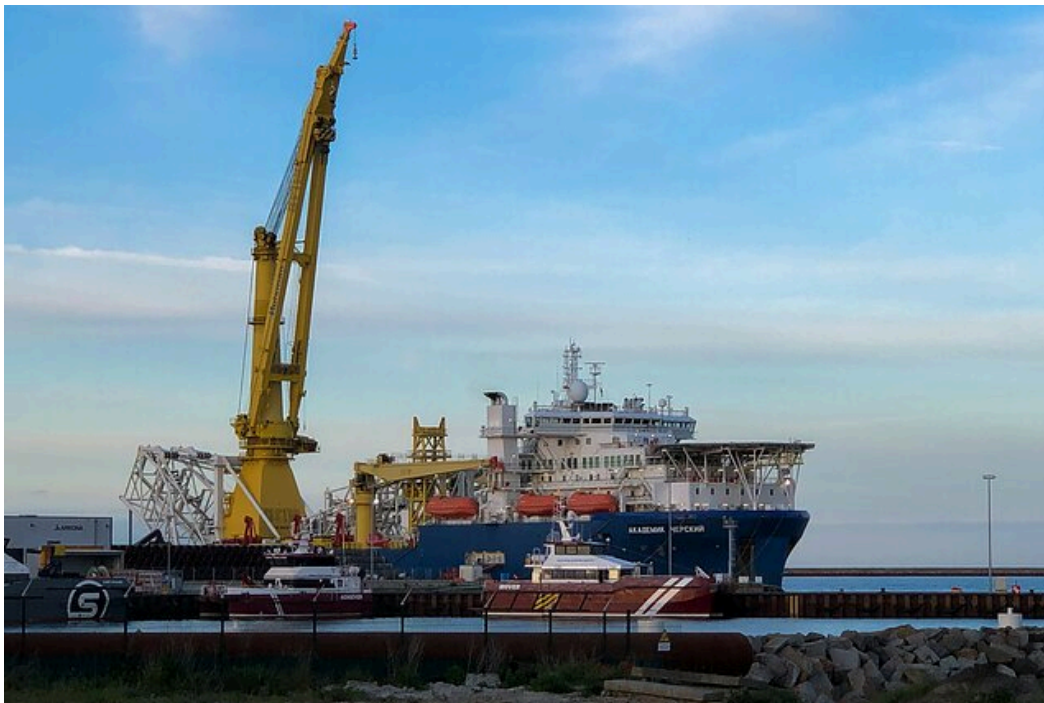
All I can say is that other experts think about other things and connect it to other areas. It's not very easy to find connections when assessing what was attacked.

– If we were to trust the experts who say it was related to the disconnection from BRELL, do you think the attacks would stop? Or would they simply have other reasons?

Baltic states with continental Europe. One is specific revenge, intimidation for the fact that you withdrew from their network, for making it difficult to support Kaliningrad.

I can imagine that there would be attacks that would be like harassment.

It could be physical attacks, like a physical disconnection. But of course, it is possible to face cyber attacks or sabotage on the mainland. We know that Russia has used these sabotage tactics, especially in places where munitions are produced that are used by the Ukrainians. We know that there have been attempts to assassinate the heads of munitions factories. So there are several ways that they could attack networks if they wanted to punish your country. However, you should always look at it with moderation, because if there are several attacks, they could be test attacks, followed by a larger, for example, military attack.



Nord Stream 2 | Photo by Vida Press

How did I come to the conclusion that Russia really intends to invade Ukraine? It was not only that troops were deployed on the border, then withdrawn, then deployed again, at that time, in 2021, we saw pilot energy operations in the

storage facilities. This was a logical action so that later, when the troops were used for a real military invasion and the gas supply was cut off, Europe would feel the effect very quickly, because it would have low reserves in the storage facilities. It was like a preparatory operation for a larger one that would follow.

When looking at these situations, at least theoretically, one always has to look at whether it is an attempt to cause problems, to demoralize society, without crossing a line where they could be clearly linked and receive a response as a result.

Sabotage can be used for the general effect of demoralizing a society, but it can also be operations to try to disable a piece of infrastructure before a larger military operation. At the moment, these appear to be relatively minor and somewhat random attacks. From what I have been able to learn about these attacks, it is not clear to me whether specific locations were being targeted or whether they were testing options.



Litgrid begins dismantling of Kruonis HPP–Sovetskask electricity transmission line supports | Photo by E. Blažio / LRT

– One of the thoughts that comes to mind when listening to what you say is how good it is that we disconnected from BRELL.

But it is serious. A decade or two ago, the Baltic states and Poland were much more realistic about how Russia could use infrastructure: energy, communications, etc., if a war really broke out. For example, you have a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in Klaipėda. At the time [when Lithuania was building the LNG terminal], I was in Germany and I was very actively opposing the Nord Stream pipeline. I talked to a lot of people, even in the government, and they made fun of you for doing this. They said, this is an extreme position, thinking that the Russians could start a war in the future, but you know, in the Baltic states they are already like that because of their history. The Germans also talked about how incredibly expensive it is and who could rationalize spending such money.

My answer back then was: when you decide that something is a threat to your society and your country, that's an additional cost you're willing to bear. That's how it is now with climate change - we're spending money on it.



LNG ship "Independence" decorated with Lithuanian symbol | Photo by T. Biliūnas / BNS

When they [the Germans] later found out that the Klaipėda LNG terminal was essentially paid for through a price reduction that the Russians offered you to

This was necessary not only for you, but also for the rest of Eastern Europe, Poland, even as far as Ukraine, because the possibilities of bringing gas across the sea to supply the region increased. You thought about this well in advance. In the end, you were proven right.

When Germany, Austria and some other countries demanded the Nord Stream 1 and later Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines, Europe was heavily dependent on Russia and this was taken advantage of, it was used as a weapon.

The problem that I now see is that there is another step related to energy and electricity. We have a new gas crisis in Europe right now, even though we shouldn't have one. Absolutely. The EU started the winter with a gas surplus. If the winter had been mild, Europe would have gotten through it with that huge surplus and wouldn't have had to worry about filling up storage for the next year. Eventually, the price of gas would have probably been pushed down closer to its original price.



Wind turbine | Photo by J. Stacevičius / LRT

What happened, however, is that we, at least I would say so, have an infrastructure problem - we are dependent on renewable energy, which is



there was no sun and very little wind at the same time. In addition, it was very cold on those same days. Countries that are very dependent on renewable energy sources had to replace these sources with something, and this led to the use of gas from storage.

This led to a surplus being used and then the talk of an energy crisis started. It happened again in early February and now they have a serious crisis because they don't know how to pay for gas in the summer to be ready for next winter. This is an example of why I think the Green Deal must be changed, reformed and a different infrastructure must be put in place. This is another weakness.

– Energy is inevitably related to geopolitics. With that in mind, what are the most important projects or energy areas that we should be paying a little more attention to right now? It seems like there are a lot of projects anyway, but maybe you have in mind a bigger picture that we should be looking at?

– It is difficult to predict everything. Infrastructure, especially natural gas, is complex: different pipelines, different LNG terminals... If one of them were to be affected, are there other connections through which gas could be supplied via other routes? And if there are, how much does it cost? It is a bit like a game of chess and it particularly affects Europe.



Nord Stream | AP photo

As someone who has worked in the energy sector in Europe for a long time, I would say that the Russians are thinking about all of this very geostrategically. For example, the geostrategic or offensive action they took by disconnecting Nord Stream and other gas, cost the Russian Federation a lot of revenue, but it was considered a minor impact.

Oil is different. Oil is absolutely essential for the Russian Federation. If it were ever cut off, it would be very difficult for Russia to continue the war. So, I think gas is an area that we need to monitor, and not just because of the Russian desire to use it as a weapon in some way: to block, to carry out cyberattacks, and so on.

This is also related to the vulnerability of the EU, because in my opinion, although the EU has made a lot of progress, their energy model, the green deal model, leads to Europe being overly dependent on wind and solar energy, when they do not have any technology that can store renewable energy. This means that the *de facto* fallback is natural gas.

So Europe needs two parallel systems of equal size. The more renewables there are, the more production capacity there needs to be and the more gas is needed. The advantage of natural gas is that these turbines can be switched on



Solar power plant | Photo by D. Umbras / LRT

– Is this a situation where being skeptical or even a little paranoid and distrusting one type of energy is fundamentally important?

– Yes, you have to be careful and have a balanced energy system. I would suggest not installing so many renewable energy sources so that on days when they are not working due to weather conditions, you don't have to take so much natural gas.

Most countries, I would say, should stay at 25 percent or less. Unless they have something special, like a lot of wind. But that's inherently quite expensive.

For example, Estonia is planning to build a nuclear power plant. When the technology of small modular reactors is a little more mature, I think it is very rational.

It doesn't make much sense to me to race and install too many offshore wind farms, which are very expensive to install and only last 20 years (after which



Wind turbines at sea | Photo by D. Umbras / LRT

– Considering everything we have discussed, and the fact that there is still a lot of uncertainty about the end of the war in Ukraine, which could determine a lot of things, could we still say that Europe is safe when it comes to the energy sector?

– No. I don't think so. I think the green deal alone is fundamentally flawed. The infrastructure being built is not sustainable. This is making natural gas more geopolitically important than before.

Furthermore, renewable energy sources lead to the installation of two parallel systems. For example, the Germans want to install multiple natural gas generation systems to make the whole system work. This is very expensive.

So now there's a movement led by the far right, but not only do they want to reopen the pipelines with Russia as part of a peace deal. And that's because they haven't solved the problem. It has to be done, but there's no clarity.

currently taking advantage of that, but not because they have a real plan. (...)



Vilnius Airport Departure Terminal | Photo by E. Blažis / LRT

Europe has a really deep security problem with its energy policy, and the three people responsible for it – Ursula von der Leyen, Teresa Ribera and Jonas Jonsson – are not changing. They think that if they strengthen their position on this energy policy, Europe will become competitive. I think that this is a very bad policy. It is very dangerous.

– Are there any quick solutions?

– No, there are no quick fixes because it's infrastructure. Infrastructure is expensive and takes a lot of time.

Take Poland, for example. Most of the heating outside the big cities is done with coal. If you want to change that, you either have to lay electricity lines or lay gas pipes everywhere, which is very time-consuming. And you also have to have a source. So making these changes is not that easy. But it is important to go in the right direction and be realistic about what could happen, how it could be used as a weapon.

of hydrogen, declare a moratorium on more renewable energy sources.

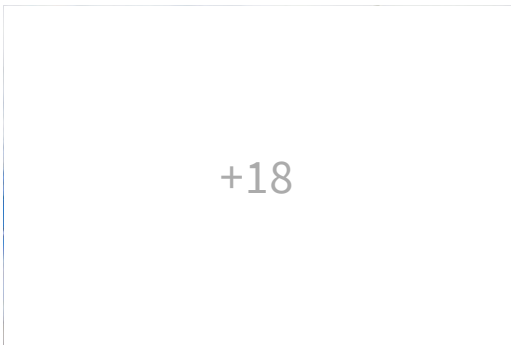


Birštonas | Photo by D. Umbrasas / LRT

You need more natural gas production, you need pipelines (...) and you need to start a massive expansion of nuclear power, modern nuclear power. That will take time.

(...) The situation in Europe is reminiscent of the term sunk cost in economics: we've put so much money into this [existing energy infrastructure – LRT.lt], it's going to cost even more money, but it's too complicated to start over, I don't want to waste the money I've already paid.

What if it doesn't work anymore? The sooner it stops, the better. But we're back to the sunk cost principle again - no party anywhere wants to be the one to tell the truth. Even the AfD in Germany is saying "bring back nuclear power." They're not proposing to build new nuclear power plants. They don't want to take responsibility for these costs.



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