"Helping to Shape EU Legislation"
DVGW energie | wasser-praxis interview with Prof Gerald Linke

Prof Linke, Congratulations on your recent election as honorary president of MARCOGAZ! DVGW has been maintaining memberships with technical associations for gas and water in Europe for a long time – how do DVGW and its German members benefit from these memberships?

European associations like MARCOGAZ or EurEau are indispensable partners in our effort to help shape EU legislation by engaging in a dialogue with the political institutions in Brussels. Typical examples include our aspiration to increase the share of renewable gases in gas grids or to improve the status of drinking water in the context of European regulatory politics.

We pursue these activities at a time when European committees put more and more gas and water-related items on their agendas, and when institutions in Brussels make sweeping decisions. Against this backdrop, it is crucial for us to help shape the European regulatory framework and to benefit from the exchange of information across national borders in order to strengthen the perception of our role as a network of excellence in safety, quality and innovation in the gas and water sector.

Can you give us an example?

One case in point affected both sectors at the same time: Some time ago, the EU Commission prepared a Directive on the expansion of telecommunications lines that envisaged laying fibre-optic cables in gas and water pipes. Both the gas and water sectors considered this to constitute an irresponsible risk for safety and hygiene. While the Directive was still in the preparatory phase, EurEau helped us reach our goal never to use water pipes for fibre-optic cables. And the dialogue between MARCOGAZ and the EU Commission resulted in putting on hold the plan to oblige all gas operators to dedicate existing gas pipes to the project.

As president of MARCOGAZ you are also a representative of European gas technology in Brussels. Which issue will you pursue most vigorously?

It goes without saying that the question of choosing the right paths of transformation to reach our climate protection goals safely and in economically and ecologically compatible ways dominates the political agenda in both Berlin and Brussels. The technical knowhow that MARCOGAZ and its members can offer will be required, among other things, to find the right answers.

Intelligently combining new and existing infrastructures such as the gas infrastructure will be crucial for the future energy system of Germany and Europe. The gas infrastructure can respond flexibly and at high peak loads to the volatile feed-in of renewable energies; moreover, it can be increasingly used for providing biomethane and synthetic gases, the latter of which can be produced by e. g. wind and solar sources using modern power to gas technologies, and they are fit for all consumer sectors.

Gas and the associated infrastructure are essential elements that greatly support our efforts to reach our climate protection goals; what is more, both are also indispensable safeguards of our energy supply, a top priority especially for the heavily industrialised countries. Combining renewable energies, gas infrastructures and sector coupling elements will enable the power sector to rely on a cost-effective and sustainable energy supply. At the same time, gases generated from renewable sources will contribute towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions across all industries, thus enabling us to reach our climate protection goals faster, more efficiently and at a lower cost.

Institutions in Brussels put more and more items on their agendas that are associated with the supply of gas. Which political issues will dominate the debate for the next two years?

The integration of the European gas market should be a political goal of top priority. The resulting energy union would intend to integrate infrastructures, reduce business-policy obstacles and harmonise the regulatory framework.

This would help us devise a European energy strategy that would not only sustainably ensure the safe supply of gas to Europe but also guarantee competition and establish gas as an energy carrier within the energy system, at an affordable cost. The European Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) plays a key role in this process and will continue to be the most important energy business instrument for setting CO_2 prices.

The emissions trading business is currently wreaking havoc on the German electricity market. The price of a greenhouse gas certificate has more than quadrupled within one year's time – it is now 21 Euros. While this is bad news for the operators of coal-fired power plants, it is good news for the energy turnaround and for climate-friendly gases, as the soaring cost of CO_2 does not only diminish the charm of operating coal-fired power plants – gas-fired power plants can now step in and close this gap right away, for they emit only half as much CO_2 per megawatt hour, approximately. In more concrete terms, this means that a quick shift from coal-based power generation to an increased use of gas-fired power plants would help us advance considerably on our way to reach national and international climate protection goals.

Forming alliances with other associations will help you exert more influence on European regulatory policies in the energy sector. What do you think would be the best design for a European gas strategy?

We need a holistic approach that aims to phase out climate-damaging energies and that instead will finally pave the way for the safe, affordable and sustainable supply of energy to all consumer sectors. The first step would be to substitute coal, petroleum and petroleum derivatives by gas. If we succeed in continuously increasing the share of CO_2-free gas, we can exploit further climate protection potentials. And last but not least, we need to intelligently combine new and existing infrastructures. Gas infrastructures with a storage capacity of 100bn m^3 and a pipeline grid covering 2.2m km across Europe are available for e.g. transferring power generated from renewable sources to the consumer over long distances.

What we have to do now is demand that the legal and regulatory framework conditions be established so that the existing technological potential can be fully exploited. For one thing is certain: The ambitious national and international climate protection goals will be met only if we combine energies from renewable sources – such as wind and solar, for example – with fossil and green gases. Integrating renewable energies in the existing gas infrastructure is key for the global energy turnaround to be successful. The gases used for the energy system of the future can be produced 100% from renewable sources and, consequently, would be greenhouse gas neutral. This being so, gas and renewables will join forces in the transition towards a future climate neutral energy system.

Prof Linke, thank you very much for this interview. We wish you the best of success!