Brussels off-grid solar

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With a relatively short coastline, Belgium has set ambitious goals to boost offshore energy capacity through wind and floating solar panels, the country"s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the North Sea told Euronews during an event in Brussels today (23 January).

Belgium wants to almost triple its offshore wind power capacity -- it currently accounts for 10% of domestic demand -- to reach 8GW by 2040, Paul Van Tigchelt said on the sidelines of the event on sustainable expansion of EU offshore renewables, organised by the WWF Europe.

While offshore wind projects unfold in the North Sea, Tigchelt said the federal government is currently assessing the possibility of floating solar technology, a relatively new approach to capture solar energy.

A pilot project has been built to develop the necessary studies with regards to cost and impact on the environment, the prime minister said, adding that the goal is to build a small demonstration project with 5MW of capacity by 2026.

"We plan to build these floating solar farms between wind turbines, to make optimal use of the limited available space, and at the same time optimally make use of the existing capacity to bring electricity onshore," Tigchelt said.

The Belgian federal government is currently in the process of preparing a tender for a North Sea project designed to increase capacity by 3,5GW by 2026. This centres on a man made island, in the Princess Elizabeth zone of the sea, and is designed to be the first stage of an integrated European offshore electricity grid that will connect Belgium to the Denmark and the UK.

There are almost 860,000 solar installations in Flanders against "barely" 150,000 in Wallonia and some 15,000 in Brussels. At peak production, this accumulated Belgian solar park produces more power than five large nuclear reactors. At present no Flemish authority has any insight into the devices that power this mass of solar energy: the inverters. These increasingly come from China as emerged from a survey conducted by VRTN News, but also from a preliminary count by grid operator Fluvius.

Neither the Flemish energy watchdog VREG, nor the energy administration VEKA, nor the Flemish distribution system operator Fluvius, nor the office of Flemish energy minister Zuhal Demir (nationalist) could tell us more about the origin of solar inverters installed in Flanders.

Fluvius keeps accurate records of every solar installation to ensure the safety of the power grid. Anyone who puts even one solar panel on their roof has to couple it with an inverter and register it with Fluvius after it has undergone a technical inspection. Fluvius keeps no figures on the origin of the devices, even though the

manufacturer is always mentioned during the inspection.

Distribution system operator Fluvius finally came up with figures late last night at the request of energy minister Demir: in the past six months, 100,000 new inverters were added in Flanders. More than half of them were Chinese. These figures are not official and they don"t say that much. There are large but also small inverters. Some convert a lot of power, others far less: as long as we don"t have the figures on the total amount of power that pass via Chinese inverters, we don"t have a picture of their share in Flemish solar energy.

This mass of inverters is growing in importance. By our rough estimate, there are already over a million of them in Flanders alone. And they control a source of electricity that, on sunny afternoons, supplies most of the power in our country. According to the databases of Europe"s high-voltage grid operators for Europe as a whole, at times this is already more power than 110 large nuclear reactors.

In Belgium, power production from solar panels already exceeded the 5,000 megawatt (MW) mark several times this year. This is as much as five large nuclear reactors: the current Belgian nuclear power park can still supply a maximum of just under 4,000 megawatts of power. All this means that on sunny afternoons, our solar plants form the largest power plant in Belgium.

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