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POLITICAL ASPECTS OF ENSURING ENERGY INDEPENDENCE OF THE BALTIC COUNTRIES IN THE ELECTRICITY SECTOR

The article analyzes the causes, problems and consequences of the project of withdrawal of the Baltic countries from the BRELL (Belarus, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) energy system. The authors consider the directions of the energy strategy of the Baltic states, including elimination of the "Baltic island" in the energy system of the European Union. It is shown that the energy infrastructure is the last area that prevents their full integration with the European Union and a break of their connections with Russia. The article reveals that the concept of energy independence of the Baltic States from Russia is openly political and contradicts the socio-economic interests. Energy independence of the Baltic States is a geopolitical project of the West with no considerations for the budgetary money or expenses of the taxpayers. As a result of the analysis of the causes and consequences of the Baltic countries' withdrawal from BRELL, the authors come to the conclusion about the political nature of the project and demonstrate problems and negative consequences of its implementation.

Key words: *energy independence, the Baltic states, Russia, European Union, electric power industry, BRELL.*

One of the most ambitious projects of the European Union (EU) and the Baltic states is the refusal of the latter from the infrastructure in the field of electricity common with Russia and Belarus and their disconnection until 2025 from

the BRELL (Belarus, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) energy system and synchronization of their power grids with networks of other EU countries. So far, the BRELL energy companies have an Agreement on parallel operation of power systems dated February 7, 2001. The Baltic energy system makes up a single technological space with the Unified Energy System of Russia.

Integration with the European energy system is well founded. From the economic and technical points of view, the Baltic states should simultaneously increase energy connections with Northern Europe and Poland while maintaining BRELL. That is exactly what is happening now. But the opinion of economists and technical experts is not taken into account by the Baltic politicians. The anti-Russian policy direction of the Baltic countries, including in the energy sector, has been further strengthened in connection with the events in Ukraine, and especially after the joining of Crimea to Russia.

In 2016, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia announced their withdrawal from BRELL in order to “gain independence from the Russian energy supply.” To justify their position, politicians replaced the cause with the consequence, that is, they explained their desire to get out of BRELL by the threat from Russia. NATO is actively involved in promoting cut-off from BRELL and NATO’s “research” leads to the conclusion of the Russian energy threat to the security of the Alliance. In fact, electricity flow in the BRELL energy ring is beneficial to all its participants from an economic point of view, as the system allows maneuvers and makes it possible to import cheaper and excess electricity depending on the market or weather conditions, which is constantly happening. If the Baltic states withdraw from BRELL, it will create problems for Russia. Therefore, Russia is working on the issue of self-sufficiency of Kaliningrad. The destruction of the unified energy system may also create problems for the Belarusian NPP under construction, depriving it of the opportunity to redirect electricity at peak moments. Thus, the reason for the Russia’s possible exit from BRELL is not its desire for such exit, but the need caused by the threat of the Baltic states’ withdrawal. Such project will require a lot of time and huge investments. Any scenario is costly. Another problem associated with the release of the Baltic states from BRELL is the problem of compensation to Russia and Belarus for the costs of establishing new infrastructure. And here the Baltic politicians again mix up the cause and effects, for example, the construction of nuclear and other power plants is regarded as an excuse to say that Russia demonstrates its intention to leave the energy ring therefore, it is not necessary to reimburse its costs.

To date, the European Commission and the Baltic states have agreed to find a solution to the problem of disconnection from BRELL and connection to the EU power grid by May 2018. And Russia plans to disconnect the Baltic states in the first half of 2018.

In the Baltic countries, along with a neutral and quite economically justified term “energy security”, the concept of “energy independence” is used.

Energy security involves not only prevention of conflicts over energy resources, but also the expansion of access to resources. In addition, the International Energy Agency includes in energy security the possibility of access to energy resources at affordable prices¹.

The EU Energy Security Strategy of 2014 emphasizes the need to address the energy independence of some countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Central and Eastern Europe) from Russia². In particular, the Baltic countries themselves hold a special opinion on energy policy towards Russia, their priority is energy independence, that is, a political approach³. Although the achievement of energy independence from Russia in official sources is indicated by a neutral term “energy security”⁴, in fact, the main focus of the energy strategy of the Baltic states is the elimination of the “Baltic island” in the European energy system. And the energy infrastructure is the last area that does not permit their full integration into the European Union and the breaking of the link with Russia⁵.

Each country considers the concept of energy security insofar as it is applicable to its conditions. And in the situation of the Baltic States, the conditions of the countries are not taken into account as the concept of energy independence from Russia is openly political and contradicts the socio-economic interests of the states. That is, the economy and the population will be sacrificed to the geopolitical interests of the West⁶.

The Analytical report “Relations between Russia and the Baltic states: from missed opportunities to real prospects” (hereinafter – the “Analytical report”) assesses the struggle for energy independence from Russia as irrational from the economic point of view⁷. Thus, the energy independence of the Baltic states is a geopolitical project, which does not take into the account either the budget money or the expenses of taxpayers. But another component of this project is worth noting, it is the desire of the West to break the energy ties of the Baltic

¹ Kasem M.F. Europe's energy security: confrontation between the US and Russia // PolitBook. – 2017. – № 2. – Pp. 147 to 159.

² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. European Energy Security Strategy. 28.05.2014. COM (2014) 330. – Brussels, 2014.

³ Kasem M.F. Europe's energy security: confrontation between the US and Russia // PolitBook. – 2017. – № 2. – Pp. 147 to 159.

⁴ Annual Report of the Minister of foreign affairs on the achieved results and future work in the field of foreign policy of the country and on the European Union. – Riga, 2016. – URL: http://www.mfa.gov.lv/images/AM_05012016_rus.pdf (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁵ The Baltic states will resolve the issue of synchronization of power grids with the EU by May, 2017. 20.12.2017. – URL: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2017/12/20/pribaltika-reshit-vopros-sinhronizacii-energosetey-s-es-k-mayu> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁶ Countries of the anti-Russian “sanitary cordon” exist only as geopolitical projects of the West. 2018. – URL: <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1882794.html> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁷ Relations between Russia and the Baltic states: from missed opportunities to real prospects. Analytical report / Collective of authors headed by N.M. Mezhevich. – SPb: SPGU, 2013.

states with Russia due to the fact that such break will prevent the return of the Baltic countries to the sphere of influence of their Eastern neighbor, as it happened in the middle of the twentieth century. In this way, the energy independence also has a preventive aspect. So, the strategy of energy independence is irrational from the point of view of interests of the Baltic States and it is rational from the point of view of geopolitical interests of the West¹.

One of the most ambitious projects of the European Union and the Baltic states is the refusal of the Baltic countries from the infrastructure in the field of electricity, common with Russia and Belarus, disconnection until 2025 from the BRELL energy system (Belarus, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and synchronization of the power grids with the networks of other EU countries. As V.V. Vorotnikov emphasizes: "In general, policy associated with the overcoming by the Baltic countries of their infrastructural "isolation" corresponds to the main EU objectives in the field of infrastructural integration and is simultaneously connected with another specific feature of the Baltic states' foreign policy, immanent confrontation with Russia"².

The collapse of the Soviet Union was politically simpler than the division of a single energy infrastructure. So far, the BRELL energy companies have an Agreement on parallel operation of power systems dated February 7, 2001³. The Baltic energy systems make up a single technological space with the Unified Energy System of Russia⁴.

But the politicians of the Baltic countries believe such structure to be unacceptable. Minister of economics of Estonia Johan Parts in 2013 said that the withdrawal of the Baltics out of BRELL is inevitable and it is necessary to integrate into the European energy system⁵. The authors agree with the position of the Analytical report that the integration with the European energy system is quite justified. From the economic and technical points of view, the Baltic

¹ Kasem M.F. Energy independence of the Baltic states: the influence of geopolitics on the economy // Problems of the post-Soviet space. – 2016. (4):90-100. DOI: 10.24975/2313-8920-2016-4-90-100; Shulga I. Reforming the power industry of the Baltic states // Energy market. – 2018. – № 4. – URL: <http://www.e-m.ru/archive/articleser.asp?aid=5215> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

² Vorotnikov V.V. 25 years of independence of the Baltic States: from the Soviet to the European Union // Contours of global transformations. – 2016. – Issue 5. – V. 9. – Pp. 7 to 23.

³ Agreement among GPO "Belenergo", JSC "FGC UES", JSC "SO UES", JSC "Augstsprieguma tīkls", "Elering OU" and ZAO "LITGRID" on parallel operation of energy systems of 07.02.2001. – 2001. – URL: http://www.so-ups.ru/fileadmin/files/company/international/icdevelopment/BRELL/BRELL_Agreement_051015.pdf (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁴ Relations between Russia and the Baltic states: from missed opportunities to real prospects. Analytical report / Collective of authors headed by N.M. Mezhevich. – SPb: SPGU, 2013.

⁵ The common power grid with Russia creates tension in the Baltics. 2013. – URL: <https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2012-12-15/Obshhaya-elektroset-s-Rossiej-sozdaet> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

states should simultaneously increase energy connections with Northern Europe and Poland, while maintaining BRELL. That is exactly what is happening now. But the opinion of economists and technical experts is not taken into account by Baltic politicians¹.

As has already been noted, the anti-Russian direction of the policy of the Baltic countries, including in the sphere of energy, has been further strengthened in connection with the events in Ukraine and especially after the joining of Crimea to Russia².

Currently, the energy systems of the Baltic countries fall short of the demand³. In 2016, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia announced their withdrawal from BRELL in order to “gain independence from the Russian energy supply.” According to many experts, this step was a political decision⁴. In particular, Jussi Jurinsalo, Director of the network company Fingrid, believes that the synchronization itself is a political issue and from the economic point of view it is necessary to carry out the energy exchange between the Baltic countries⁵.

To justify their position, politicians replace the cause with the consequence, that is, the desire to get out of BRELL is explained by threats from Russia. For example, President of Estonia Kersti Kaljulaid in an interview with the Washington Post said that he does not exclude an attack by Russia on the communication lines, and in particular “a shutdown of some power systems”⁶. Advisor to the Lithuanian Minister of energy Aurelia Wernickaite also claims that Russia itself is preparing to disconnect the Baltic states from BRELL, she is echoed by the Deputy of the Lithuanian Seimas Paulus Saugardas stressing that for Russia blackmail is a common practice and geopolitical weapon⁷. NATO actively participates in promoting disconnection from BRELL and its “research” leads

¹ Relations between Russia and the Baltic states: from missed opportunities to real prospects. Analytical report / Collective of authors headed by N.M. Mezhevich. – SPb: SPGU, 2013.

² Kasem M.F. The political component of the Russian-Latvian relations at the present stage (from 2014 to early 2017) // Problems of the post-Soviet space. – 2017. 4(2):169-175. DOI: 10.24975/2313-8920-2017-4-2-169-175.

³ Seliverstov S.S. Cross-border cooperation between Russia and the EU in the field of electric power: key directions and prospects // Joint conference of EURELECTRIC and CIS EEC, October 3, 2012 – Brussels, 2012.

⁴ Polozkova A. Energy suicide: why do the Baltic states run away from BRELL? May 14, 2017. – URL: <http://minenergo.gov.by/wp-content/uploads/RF-6.doc> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁵ Niemeläinen Y. The Baltic states want to secede from the Russian power system. They hope to join the European Union by 2025. 27.06.2017. – URL: <http://inosmi.ru/economic/20170627/239684063.html> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁶ President of Estonia does not exclude that Putin can turn off the power supply to NATO countries. 24.03.2017. – URL: <http://baltnews.ee/mir/20170324/1015828564.html> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁷ Nosovich A. Russia can fulfill the dream of the Baltic states on their disconnection from BRELL. 13.09.2017. – URL: <https://www.rubaltic.ru/article/ekonomika-i-biznes/13092017-rossiya-mozhet-ispolnit-mechty-pribaltiki-otklyuchit-ot-brell/> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

to the conclusion of the Russian energy threat to the security of the Alliance¹. In addition, politicians from the Baltic states speak about the withdrawal from BRELL implying the electricity problem for the Kaliningrad region, as a positive development. If their decision on the disconnection from BRELL they call a break from the “past occupation”, it is quite logical that the intention of Russia to disconnect the Baltic states from BRELL after such statements they call “energy blackmail” and an “aggression against neighbors”².

In fact, electricity flows in the BRELL energy ring are beneficial to all its participants from an economic point of view, as the system allows maneuvers and makes it possible to import cheaper and excess electricity depending on the market or weather conditions, which is constantly happening. If the Baltic states get out of BRELL, then, noted General Director of the energy development Fund Andrey Listovsky, it will create problems for Russia³. In particular, the Kaliningrad region is supplied with electricity through Lithuania and in winter St. Petersburg uses Latvian gas storage facilities. Therefore, Russia is working on the issue of self-sufficiency of Kaliningrad⁴. The destruction of the unified energy system may also create problems for the Belarusian NPP that is being constructed now, depriving it of the opportunity to redirect electricity at peak moments⁵. Thus, the reason for the Russia’s possible exit from BRELL is not its desire for such exit, but the need caused by the threat of the withdrawal of the Baltic states.

In this regard, back in 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided that it was necessary to ensure reliable energy supply to the Kaliningrad region, in particular, to resume the construction of the Baltic nuclear power plant⁶. In 2017, in an interview with the American TV channel CBS, Vladimir Putin said that the synchronization of the Baltic electricity networks with the EU can isolate some areas of Russia: “This means that between some regions of the Russian Federation there will be zones with no power lines... and we will have to spend billions

¹ Miroslavov O. «Escape» of the Baltic states from BRELL may be left without European funding. 26.12.2017. – URL: <https://realnewsland.ru/articles/51509-pobeg-pribaltiki-iz-brell-mozhet-ostatsya-bez-evropejskogo-finansirovaniya.html> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

² Nosovich A. Russia can fulfill the dream of the Baltic states on their disconnection from BRELL. 13.09.2017. – URL: <https://www.rubaltic.ru/article/ekonomika-i-biznes/13092017-rossiya-mozhet-ispolnit-mechty-pribaltiki-otklyuchit-ot-brell/> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

³ Polozkova A. Energy suicide: why do the Baltic states run away from BRELL? May 14, 2017. – URL: <http://minenergo.gov.by/wp-content/uploads/RF-6.doc> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁴ Niemeläinen Y. The Baltic states want to secede from the Russian power system. They hope to join the European Union by 2025. 27.06.2017. – URL: <http://inosmi.ru/economic/20170627/239684063.html> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁵ Miroslavov O. «Escape» of the Baltic states from BRELL may be left without European funding. 26.12.2017. – URL: <https://realnewsland.ru/articles/51509-pobeg-pribaltiki-iz-brell-mozhet-ostatsya-bez-evropejskogo-finansirovaniya.html> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁶ Polozkova A. Energy suicide: why do the Baltic states run away from BRELL? May 14, 2017. – URL: <http://minenergo.gov.by/wp-content/uploads/RF-6.doc> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

of dollars to build this system, whereas our European partners will also have to spend billions of dollars to include the Baltic countries in their energy ring"¹.

But for the Baltic states, an exit from BRELL will not be easy either. Such project will require a lot of time and huge investments. A part of the costs will be covered from the EU infrastructure funds, but the main costs will be ultimately covered by electricity consumers². As to the European funding, in addition to timely submitting the budgetary funding request to the European Commission for the years 2020 to 2026, the Baltic countries will have to develop their own unified draft of connection to the EU infrastructure, to the detriment of their ambitions³.

Currently, the EU Joint Research Center is considering various synchronization scenarios: via Poland by land or via Northern Europe through submarine cable. It is possible to exit BRELL without synchronization, but in any case, the withdrawal, according to the Baltic states, is inevitable. Any scenario involves high costs, and the connection through the submarine cable is fraught with frequent accidents. Some Baltic politicians still have doubts about the reasonableness of a full exit from BRELL. Thus, Vice-Chairman of the Committee of the Seimas of Lithuania on budget and finance Kestutis Glaveckas believes that the exit of Lithuania from BRELL is a political decision, and a greater number of backup connections would be more reliable [BEMIP: scenarios..., 2017]. Finland may serve as an example of a practical attitude to the energy market, it imports electricity from the Russian Federation, and then directs part of it to Lithuania via Estlink⁴.

Another problem associated with the release of the Baltic states from BRELL is the problem of compensation to Russia and Belarus for the costs of establishing new infrastructure. And here the Baltic politicians again mix up the cause and effects, for example, the construction of nuclear and other power plants is regarded as an excuse to say that Russia demonstrates its intention to leave the energy ring, therefore, it is not necessary to reimburse its costs⁵.

¹ Vladimir Putin criticizes plans to connect the electricity systems of the Baltic states and Western Europe. 29.09.2015. – URL: <http://www.kurier.lt/v-putin-kritikuot-planus-soedinit-elektroenergeticheskie-sistemy-stran-baltii-i-zapadnoj-evropy/> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

² Polozkova A. Energy suicide: why do the Baltic states run away from BRELL? May 14, 2017. – URL: <http://minenergo.gov.by/wp-content/uploads/RF-6.doc> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

³ Miroslavov O. «Escape» of the Baltic states from BRELL may be left without European funding. 26.12.2017. – URL: <https://realnewsland.ru/articles/51509-pobeg-pribaltiki-iz-brell-mozhet-ostatsya-bez-evropejskogo-finansirovaniya.html> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁴ Decline of BRELL. What will the rupture of energy ties with the Baltic states mean for the Union? 26.10.2017. – URL: <https://www.sonar2050.org/publications/k-gryadushchemu-zakatu-brell-chem-zanyatsya-soyuznoy-energetike/> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

⁵ Decline of BRELL. What will the rupture of energy ties with the Baltic states mean for the Union? 26.10.2017. – URL: <https://www.sonar2050.org/publications/k-gryadushchemu-zakatu-brell-chem-zanyatsya-soyuznoy-energetike/> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

To date, the European Commission and the Baltic states have agreed to find a solution to the problem of disconnection from BRELL and connection to the EU power grid by May 2018. And Russia plans to disconnect the Baltic states in the first half of 2018¹.

In the article devoted to the Rail Baltica project N. M. Mezhevich emphasized that “large infrastructure projects are a recognized driver of the national economy in any country.” But in the Baltic states, these projects, contrary to economic realities, are aimed “at achieving a falsely understood geo-economic independence,” and such projects may eventually become not a driver, but a destabilizing factor for the economy of these countries². All of the above is fully applicable to the project of disconnection from BRELL.

Summing up the analysis of the causes and consequences of the Baltic countries' withdrawal from BRELL, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- the project is political in nature and is a geopolitical project of the West;
- the implementation of the project will bring unjustified costs to the Baltic countries themselves, as well as to Russia and Belarus;
- the most acceptable to all BRELL participants, would be connection of Baltic countries to the EU electricity supply system with the preservation of the BRELL electricity grid.

The desire of the West to break the energy ties of the Baltic states with Russia is conditioned by the fact that such break will not allow the Baltic countries to return to the sphere of influence of their Eastern neighbor, as it happened in the middle of the twentieth century. In this sense, the energy independence also has a preventive aspect.

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¹ The Baltic states will resolve the issue of synchronization of power grids with the EU by May, 2017. 20.12.2017. – URL: <https://cadaily.com/ru/news/2017/12/20/pribaltika-reshit-vopros-sinhronizacii-energostey-s-es-k-mayu> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

² Mezhevich N.M. Rail Baltica: between the economic absurd and political crisis. 22.01.2018. – URL: <https://baltstudies.ru/smi/rail-baltica-mezhdu-ekonomicheskim-absurdom-i-politicheskim-krizisom/> (Date of the application: 11.10.2018).

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