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Spain Looks to Integration Deal With France, Portugal to Lessen EU Dependence on Russian Gas

By The Moscow Times

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BRUSSELS — Spain has welcomed a new agreement to connect its energy network with those in Portugal and France as a major step toward breaking Europe's dependence on Russian gas supplies.

Spanish Energy Minister Jose Manuel Soria said Thursday the deal to double the electricity interconnection capacity between the three countries and kick-start a major gas project was "a very important political agreement."

He said the MIDCAT project linking gas infrastructure through Spain's northeast Catalonia region to southern France would help ensure that "Europe reduces its dependence on Russian gas."

The EU imports almost one-third of the natural gas that it consumes from Russia. Much

of that transits through conflict-torn Ukraine.

A gas price war between Moscow and Kiev was avoided this week, at least until the end of March. Previous price disputes have hit EU supplies.

Manuel Soria's comments came as European Union energy ministers gathered in Brussels to discuss boosting the percentage of energy production capacity that can be made available to EU partners to 10 percent by 2020.

Spain, Portugal and France sealed the agreement on boosting energy cooperation in Madrid on Wednesday.

Electricity interconnection between the two Iberian Peninsula neighbors and France, which relies on nuclear power for more than two-thirds of its electricity needs, stands at around five percent.

The new electricity line through the Pyrenees Mountains was inaugurated last month. Once a special transformer is hooked up in 2017 it will significantly boost capacity. But new infrastructure will be required to reach the 10 percent EU target.

As the ministers met, the EU's executive commission announced that it would make 100 million euros ($111 million) available for projects aimed at ending energy isolation and improving Europe's energy security.

"This funding is an investment opportunity to build a competitive, sustainable and secure energy market, and ultimately bring the benefits into our homes and businesses," said Miguel Arias Canete, the EU's commissioner on climate action and energy.

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