

## ESSENTIAL ASPECTS CONCERNING THE APPLICATION OF THE COMPETITION LAW IN THE ENERGY AND NATURAL GAS SECTOR

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**Abstract:** *The paper presents essential aspects concerning the application of competition law in the energy and natural gas sector. Romania is largely independent in terms of energy, the entire domestic demand of electricity and a significant part of the gas demand being covered from the domestic production. The Government has a strong presence in the market of natural gas production too, and controls most electricity generation capacities. In large segments of the retail gas and energy market price regulation continues to exist. There is an absolute need to renew production capacities in the traditional segments, as well as the infrastructure, although there was a significant expansion of the generation capacity by using renewable energy sources.*

**Key words:** *regulated industries, electricity sector, natural gas sector, competition, market liberalization*

### INTRODUCTION

The provisions of the Competition Law concerning restrictive agreements, control of economic concentrations and individual behaviour largely follows the provisions of the competition legislation of the European Union and the implementing regulations, but with several exceptions. Articles 101 and 102 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFUE) are applicable in the case of actions before courts and before the European authority, because Romania is a member of the European Union. At the same time, the Competition Law regulates at article 9 the cases when the Romanian Competition Council (CCR) may intervene against acts of public institutions that prevent, limit or distort competition. This gives the Romanian Competition Council the right to prepare endorsements on how public acts, including draft laws proposed, influence competition.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper was prepared based on the report published by the Romanian Competition Council concerning the application of the competition law in the sector of electricity and natural gas. In this paper, I presented essential aspects related to the application of the competition law in the above-mentioned sectors and I highlighted that all regulated sectors have a number of elements in common with those in other European countries, a significant part of the institutional and regulatory environment being modelled based on the legislation of the European Union.

### RESEARCH RESULTS

#### 1. The electricity sector

As it is the case of the other regulated industries, the regulatory framework governing the electricity and natural gas markets is strongly influenced by the European Union directives, which are also applied to the institutional framework.

The liberalization of the electricity markets, unlike the other sectors, such as telecommunications, was a chapter much more complicated and politically sensitive, for Romania. Romania does not depend so much on electricity imports, like other countries in Europe, the entire demand of electricity and a significant part of the natural gas demand can be covered by the internal production. This enabled previous governments to maintain low electricity tariffs, leading to a lack of political will to shift to a completely liberalized, competitive market.

There was a significant reluctance in opening both sectors and integrating them with the neighbouring markets, because of the possible implications on the level of electricity production, on the domestic upstream production of coal and especially on the consumer segment in the electricity and natural gas markets. From the legal point of view, all the steps required towards liberalization were taken, but the regulated retail markets continue to co-exist with a limited competitive segment at big industrial consumers, which leads to market distortions. The regulation of tariffs, influenced by political factors and difficult to align to the principles of cost recovery, undermined the incentive to invest in works of repair and expansion of production facilities. The transition to liberalized markets until 2017 for electricity and until 2018 for natural gas will create major difficulties for the regulatory authority in this sector, and also for the Competition Council. [8]

## **2. The electricity sector**

Once the company that used to have monopoly, namely RENEL, was restructured by vertical and horizontal separation, the structure of the electricity market was developed. The market was divided in activities of production, transmission, distribution, and supply, with different players at each level.

Depending on the source of energy, separate electricity generation companies were established at general level, and large state-owned production companies were created, focused on hydroelectric energy, nuclear energy and coal power plants. The group of state-owned companies account for 80% to 90% of the total production, dominating the production, the hydropower is 30%, the nuclear power almost 7%, the coal approximately 32%, and hydrocarbons 18%. Approximately 13% of the total power produced represents private companies, which generate energy from gas power plants and renewable resources. Due to the low electricity tariffs in Romania, imports do not have a significant role.

The Competition Council believes that production companies are managed separately and compete with each other, although most of the production capacity is owned by the state. In order to describe the relationship with the state-owned producers, other sources used the term “cartel soft”, highlighting the fear that the market is not 100% competitive, because each energy producing company is organized separately as a legal entity, all being controlled by the same ministry and pursuing strategies they would not pursue as privatized players with independent shareholders. Despite the fact that the energy mix in the market is balanced, each producer bases itself on a single source of energy, which is why the optimal operation of the power plants is difficult. Suppliers with high prices especially are in a risky position, because the market structure and the renewable source share are increasing.

The Independent System Operator (OIS), Transelectrica operates the power transmission grid. The market administrator, OPCOM, is in charge with several activities, among which the management of the wholesale electricity and green certificate sale contract market, being monitored by the regulatory authority for the electricity markets, ANRE. Eight distribution companies that have local monopoly based on concession own the distribution grid. Most distribution companies were privatized and are auxiliaries of European electricity conglomerates, being viewed as “last-resort” suppliers for retail customers who continue to receive electricity under regulated conditions instead of a free market. Both at wholesale as well as at retail level, the electricity supply was opened to competition. Market competition, at retail and wholesale levels, is very low, the share of the biggest supplier in the retail market exceeding 20%, while the combined market share of the 10 biggest suppliers is 75%. The Romanian electricity market is supposedly becoming increasingly integrated with the neighbouring CEEC markets, because, together with Poland, it is expected to join a current market integration project started by the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, but there are concerns that the transmission current tariffs will affect the trade with other member countries.

Nevertheless, supply contracts can be concluded on the market organized by OPCOM (the gas and electricity market operator); in the past, the parties concluded bilateral long-term supply agreements, outside the market. At least one third of the total production has been governed until recently by such agreements, although the recent insolvency of the company Hidroelectrica led to the termination of such bilateral agreements. Many long-term supply agreements concluded by Hidroelectrica are being analysed by the European Commission, because the low electricity tariffs for the main industrial customers create problems in terms of state aid. At the same time, the Romanian Competition Council analyses a few contracts with potential anticompetitive effect that might close access in the markets and might remove liquidities from the spot market.

Long-term contracts also provide significant advantages, because they provide the funding required for producers' investments and reduce tariff volatility, especially for users. Certainty is present in the market for the new 2012 Energy Law, which provides for a transparency requirement for all bilateral electricity supply agreements and for the market usage for all supply agreements.

The main source of distortion of effective competition in the electricity markets is the big regulated retail market, which has consequences on other market levels as well. Although, for several years, large industrial users were supplied with electricity under competitive conditions, which led to encouraging the creation of a competitive supply market, private customers and small-size companies continued to benefit from tariff regulation, which maintains tariffs artificially, at low levels. Currently, private customers and small companies have the option to shift to competitive suppliers, but very few chose to do this. Once they shift to the competitive segment of the market, consumers may no longer return to the regulated one, which leads to an additional factor of losing the transfer supplement.

Due to the fact that suppliers in the regulated segment of the retail market purchase significant quantities of electricity through contracts regulated with a maximum price limit, the regulation of tariffs has effects that exceed retail markets. Although ANRE has limited the use of regulated wholesale contracts, such contracts continue to cover almost 25% of the total electrical power produced. Moreover, due to the fact that ANRE regulates distribution companies, it can prevent them from undergoing cost increases, in order to favour prices for end consumers, which undermines, in its turn, the incentive to invest in leaving the grid. Until the end of 2017, the transition to a market 100% competitive will continue. Tariffs for end customers will grow, and political pressures to keep lower tariffs at electricity can be significant. The current experience shows that many customers will adjust slowly to a changing environment. The number of complaints filed with the consumer protection authority is high, but it largely concerns the lack of transparency in electricity bills. Nevertheless, there is a risk that, if the transition is not adequately managed, the number of complaints will grow suddenly, and trust in the competitive market will be undermined. This would increase, in its turn, political pressures to maintain tariff regulations. [8]

**Table 1.**

**Evolution of current production capacities in Romania,  
in the 2008-2013 period and forecasts for the 2014-2020 period**

| Available net power        | 2011         | 2012  | 2013  | 2014               | 2015  | 2016  | 2017  | 2018  | 2019  | 2020  |
|----------------------------|--------------|-------|-------|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                            | Achievements |       |       | Reference scenario |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Thermoelectric power plant | 8807         | 8875  | 9271  | 9271               | 8828  | 8415  | 8378  | 9614  | 9579  | 9489  |
| Nuclear power plants       | 1300         | 1300  | 1300  | 1300               | 1300  | 1300  | 1300  | 1300  | 1965  | 2630  |
| Hydroelectric power plant  | 6145         | 6196  | 6227  | 6322               | 6356  | 6392  | 6392  | 6446  | 6500  | 6332  |
| Wind power plant           | 1006         | 1753  | 2451  | 3000               | 3200  | 3300  | 3500  | 3800  | 3900  | 4200  |
| Biomass energy plant       | 24           | 27    | 49    | 100                | 125   | 150   | 176   | 200   | 200   | 300   |
| Photovoltaic power station | 0            | 21    | 565   | 1200               | 2000  | 2000  | 2000  | 2000  | 2000  | 2000  |
| <b>TOTAL</b>               | 17282        | 18172 | 19863 | 21193              | 21810 | 21557 | 21747 | 23361 | 24144 | 25251 |

Source: Report on the preliminary results of the sectoral enquiry on the Romanian electricity market, p.42

From the data presented in Table 1, we can see that the power available in Romania was on an uptrend from 2008 until 2013, and it will reach, in 2020, up to 25251 MW, which is the equivalent of the installed capacity at national level, with an increase by approximately 50%. We can also notice that the share of electric power from renewable sources, especially wind power, recorded significant increases in the analysed period.

*National electricity consumption*

For the analysis of the electricity production and sale market, the electricity consumption is very important, because it shows the balance between demand and supply for the whole electricity system. It also reflects the electricity demand recorded at national level.

The electricity consumption is subject to fluctuations, depending on the moment of the day and the season. Thus, in the daytime, the electricity demand tends to be higher, in working days and on Saturday, whilst in the night time it is lower, as well as on Sundays and statutory holidays, and it also has a seasonal variation. In order to ensure the stability of the grid, a forecast of the electricity demand must be made. Such forecast implies, in its turn, a forecast of the characteristics of the respective demand: size, evolution over time, models of demand.

Table 2 presents the electricity consumption in the 2011-2013 period and the forecast for 2014-2020.

**Table 2.**

**Scenarios of the evolution of the domestic electricity consumption in Romania**

|   | U.M        | 2011         | 2012 | 2013 | 2014     | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|---|------------|--------------|------|------|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|   |            | Achievements |      |      | Forecast |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| <b>REFERENCE SCENARIO</b>                   |            |              |      |      |          |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| <b>Domestic net electricity consumption</b> | <b>Twh</b> | 54.9         | 54.4 | 52.3 | 51.8     | 51.8 | 52.1 | 52.6 | 53.2 | 54.0 | 54.9 |
| <b>Annual growth rate</b>                   | <b>%</b>   | 2.9          | -0.9 | -3.9 | -1.0     | 0.1  | 0.5  | 1.0  | 1.1  | 1.5  | 1.7  |
| <b>UNFAVOURABLE SCENARIO</b>                |            |              |      |      |          |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| <b>Domestic net electricity consumption</b> | <b>Twh</b> | 54.9         | 54.4 | 52.3 | 51.0     | 50.2 | 49.7 | 49.5 | 49.5 | 49.7 | 50.1 |
| <b>Annual growth rate</b>                   | <b>%</b>   | 2.9          | -0.9 | -3.9 | -2.5     | -1.5 | -1.0 | -0.5 | 0.0  | 0.5  | 0.8  |
| <b>FAVOURABLE SCENARIO</b>                  |            |              |      |      |          |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| <b>Domestic net electricity consumption</b> | <b>Twh</b> | 54.9         | 54.4 | 53.3 | 52.4     | 52.9 | 53.6 | 54.4 | 55.5 | 56.9 | 58.4 |
| <b>Annual growth rate</b>                   | <b>%</b>   | 2.9          | -0.9 | -3.9 | 0.1      | 1.1  | 1.3  | 1.5  | 2.0  | 2.5  | 2.6  |

*Source: Report on the preliminary results of the sectoral enquiry on the Romanian electricity market, p.45*

Table 2 presents two scenarios of the evolution of the consumption by 2020. From the previously presented data, it results that in the period between 2011 and 2014, at national level, the electricity consumption recorded a continuous downtrend, and for the next period it is forecast that this downtrend will be stabilized, on the contrary, it will continue to decrease.

Taking into account the above-mentioned data, it is deemed that by 2020, the electricity consumption at national level will not grow significantly.

**Table 3.**

**The electricity volume traded in the wholesale market, total Romanian electricity production and sale market, including the import and export annually recorded in the 2009-2013 period**

| Indicator   | 2009  |        | 2010  |       | 2011     |       | 2012   |        | 2013  |        |
|---|-------|--------|-------|-------|----------|-------|--------|--------|-------|--------|
|   | Gwh   | %      | Gwh   | %     | Gwh      | %     | Gwh    | %      | Gwh   | %      |
| <b>Production</b>                                 | 56693 | 100.0  | 59139 | 100.0 | 60385    | 100.0 | 56714  | 100.0  | 55777 | 100.0  |
| <b>Import</b>                                     | 676   | 1.9    | 943   | 1.59  | 1036     | 1.72  | 1402   | 2.47   | 450   | 0.81   |
| <b>Export</b>                                     | 3154  | 5.56   | 3854  | 6.52  | 2942     | 4.87  | 1149   | 2.03   | 2466  | 4.42   |
| <b>Domestic consumption</b>                       | 41583 | 73.35  | 43440 | 73.45 | 45814    | 75.87 | 45884  | 80.90  | 43771 | 78.47  |
| <b>Electricity volume in the wholesale market</b> | 80803 | 142.35 | 95212 | 161.0 | 105910.5 | 175.4 | 100248 | 176.76 | 76914 | 137.90 |

Source: Report on the preliminary results of the sectoral enquiry on the Romanian electricity market, p.48

From the data presented in table 3, it results that the volume of electricity annually traded in the wholesale market is higher by approximately 140-175%, compared to the electricity production. Moreover, in the period between 2009 and 2013, the quantity of imported electricity recorded a lower value compared to the quantity of exported electricity.

**Table 4.**

**Evolution of the number of consumers supplied under competitive conditions and under regulated conditions in the period between 2009 and 2013**

| Consumers supplied                | 2009    | 2010    | 2011    | 2012    | 2013    |
|-----------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| <b>Regulated conditions</b>       | 8833375 | 8914618 | 8944092 | 8991838 | 8991881 |
| non-household                     | 583432  | 591756  | 563030  | 554734  | 501190  |
| Household                         | 8249943 | 8322862 | 8381062 | 8437104 | 8490691 |
| <b>Competitive conditions</b>     | 4887    | 8323    | 12675   | 13467   | 19214   |
| <b>%non-household competitive</b> | 0.83    | 1.39    | 2.20    | 2.37    | 3.69    |

Source: Report on the preliminary results of the sectoral enquiry on the Romanian electricity market, p.62

Despite the fact that the degree of liberalization of the electricity market recorded many fluctuations in the period between 2007 and 2013, it grew constantly, the number of consumers supplied under competitive conditions, reaching, in the period between 2009 and 2013, an increase of almost 300%. However, the value recorded by the number of non-household consumers in the total non-household consumers was very low, reaching 3.69%

**Table 5.**

**Evolution of the electricity consumption at end consumers, depending on their type and the conditions under which they are supplied**

| Consumers supplied            | 2009  |     | 2010  |     | 2011  |     | 2012  |     | 2013  |     |
|-------------------------------|-------|-----|-------|-----|-------|-----|-------|-----|-------|-----|
|                               | Gwh   | %   | Gwh   | %   | Gwh   | %   | Gwh   | %   | Gwh   | %   |
| <b>Consumers supplied</b>     | 23046 | 55  | 21365 | 49  | 20289 | 44  | 20779 | 45  | 18966 | 43  |
| non-household                 | 12057 | 29  | 10119 | 23  | 8699  | 19  | 8792  | 19  | 7296  | 17  |
| Household                     | 10990 | 26  | 11246 | 26  | 11590 | 25  | 11987 | 26  | 11670 | 27  |
| <b>Competitive conditions</b> | 18536 | 45  | 22075 | 51  | 25525 | 56  | 25105 | 55  | 24805 | 57  |
| non-household                 | 18536 | 45  | 22075 | 51  | 25525 | 56  | 25105 | 55  | 24805 | 57  |
| Household                     | 0     | 0   | 0     | 0   | 0     | 0   | 0     | 0   | 0     | 0   |
| <b>Total end consumption</b>  | 41583 | 100 | 43440 | 100 | 45814 | 100 | 45884 | 100 | 43771 | 100 |

Source: Report on the preliminary results of the sectoral enquiry on the Romanian electricity market, p.62

From the data presented in table 5 it results that in the period between 2009 and 2013, the competitive market segment was on a continuous uptrend, corresponding to the decrease of the regulated sector. The electricity volume recorded by non-household consumers had a similar evolution, more specifically the consumption corresponding to the competitive segment grew. The consumption of the household consumers was made under regulated conditions, and in the analysed period it did not record significant variations from the perspective of the share of the volume corresponding to this segment.

For the evolution of the electricity market towards its opening to a functional competitive market, a relevant indicator is also the rate of change of the energy supplier.

Table 6 shows that the rate of change of the energy supplier, calculated according to the quantity of electricity supplied recorded significant increases in 2013, compared to 2012.

**Table 6.**

**Evolution of the electricity consumption**

| It. No. | Type of consumer  | Rate of change of the energy supplier (%) in 2012, depending on: |                 | Rate of change of the energy supplier (%) in 2013, depending on : |                 |
|---------|---|--|-----------------|---|-----------------|
|         |   | Number of consumption places                                     | Energy supplied | Number of consumption places                                      | Energy supplied |
| 1.      | Non-household consumers with low consumption+ Household | 0.013  | 0.409           | 0.057   | 1.215           |
| 2.      | Non-household consumers with high consumption           | 7.241  | 8.986           | 6.687   | 9.993           |
| 3.      | Non-household consumers with very high consumption      | 7.346  | 14.302          | 15.687  | 17.305          |
| 4.      | <b>TOTAL</b>  | 0.033  | 7.649           | 0.075   | 8.990           |

Source: Report on the preliminary results of the sectoral enquiry on the Romanian electricity market, p.64

**3. The natural gas sector**

The natural gas market is confronted with a situation similar to that of the electricity markets. Although they are liberalized, the tariffs in large areas of the market continue to be regulated. This led to low tariffs for private consumers. Again, the need for transition towards a completely liberalized market creates major challenges.

In Romania, approximately 70% of the total domestic demand is covered by the domestic natural gas production, the remaining 30% being imported from Russia. The domestic production comes from the two large companies, the state-owned company Romgaz and the private company Petrom. At the same time, Romgaz controls a significant part of the natural gas storage capacities.

The trade in the deregulated market segment needs a functional, transparent market and access to the required infrastructure, however, not all the elements were implemented. The gas exchange does not function 100%, which leads to the limitation of the trade opportunities for independent suppliers and creates fears concerning the capacity of the old companies in the market to exercise their power in the market. The Competition Council and ANRE started a cooperation for the development of an efficient ex ante regulation for the gas market, but the project has not been completed yet.

The main challenge in the gas field, as in the case of electricity, is the retail segment, regulated in the present, but also the commitment for a transition towards a completely liberalised market by 2018. Although private consumers can already choose the liberalised market, very few have done this. The main fear would be an unexpected increase in the natural gas tariffs, once the current tariff regulation, which is difficult to align to the cost principles, comes to an end and domestic gas prices will be aligned to a higher extent to international prices.

A significant part of the support granted to private customers in order that they may have a better understanding of a liberalised market could be viewed as a matter of concern by consumers' protection, because it will focus on providing the necessary information, providing transparency and the consumers' possibility to shift from one supplier to another. Moreover, the efforts made to provide a functional and transparent market for the gas trade are related to fears concerning the effects of liberalization. Consumers can have many advantages from the market liberalization if there is effective competition, and traditional suppliers have lower possibilities to keep their competitors far from the retail markets. Thus, the progress made at establishing a functional market might lead to a successful liberalization of the retail market.

From 2012, the regulatory authority in the electricity and gas sector is ANRE, a public independent authority, according to the applicable European Union legislation. In the past, Romania had two independent regulatory authorities for electricity and natural gas, but from 2007, ANRE took over all regulatory functions in the two sectors.

ANRE does not generally have a long history and does not impose the same respect among the stakeholders involved as an organization of the type of the Competition Council. The ANRE President was, before the 2012 reforms, under the coordination of the Prime Minister. ANRE was largely inefficient due to the perception of the political influence on its decision-making process. Although the appointment process was reformed, in order to provide increased independence, many viewed the first appointments as being politically influenced. [7] Despite of the fact that the political sensitivity of electricity prices can show the desire of the Parliament and of the government to maintain a certain influence on the decisions of ANRE and on the policy directions, the political influence does not expand challenges so that ANRE may establish fully liberalized energy markets.

ANRE cannot apply the provisions of the Competition Law; however, in addition to maintaining the safety in supply and consumers' protection, it is also responsible for ensuring a competitive energy market. In relation to the energy sector, the powers of the Competition Council and ANRE are overlapped. Through the agreement that formalizes the collaboration between ANRE and the Competition Council in Romania, ANRE may inform the Council concerning the possible anticompetitive practices, detected by the market.

The collaboration between ANRE and the Competition Council has not been very productive, but it seems to have been improved recently, even if the Competition Council initiated the investigation of ANRE for the adoption of documents undermining competition on the market of energy from renewable sources.

## CONCLUSIONS

Romania is largely independent in terms of energy, the entire domestic electricity demand and a significant part of the gas demand being covered from the domestic production. The government also has a strong presence in the natural gas production market as well, and controls most of the electricity generation capacity. In general, electric generators are based on a single source of energy, which is why they have a reduced reaction flexibility to the evolution of the markets. In large segments of the gas and electricity retail market prices continue to be regulated. There is an absolute need to renew the production capacities in the traditional segments, but also the infrastructure, although there was a significant expansion of the generation capacity by using renewable sources of energy.

Romania is involved, unlike other European countries, in the approach for the introduction of the complete liberalization of the retail market in the following years. However, this fact creates major challenges, because prices should be increased. This will lead to the creation of many opportunities for investment in infrastructure, particularly in

the infrastructure connecting Romania to neighbouring markets, but it will be unattractive from the political point of view.

In international competitiveness reports, Romania receives low scores. This happens due to the fact that the Competition Council in Romania carries out its activity in a difficult economic environment, which affected, in the past, the assessment of the performance of its competition regime, and it generally received low scores in international comparisons. Following the inquiry for this report, it results that part of the institutional characteristics of the competition regime, the process of applying the law, prioritization, analysing the merits of the competition cases and the capacity to intervene against public limitations of competition are currently at the same level with the international trends.

A main recommendation to be considered by Romania and by the Competition Council in Romania would be to provide continuity and a systematic implementation of the reforms of the competition regime. Some measures meant to streamline the investigation tools, such as leniency programmes that should work more efficiently, and should focus more on key economic sectors, for a more consistent management of the most efficient use of the set of tools available to the Competition Council to improve the market performance and the domestic expertise, and also the consolidation of human resources, can only be effective if they are constantly monitored, for a longer period of time.

In relation to the economic concentrations, it is recommendable to assess the customization of the notification thresholds, but also to carry out an ex post analysis concerning the efficiency of the corrective measures. In 2004 the latest review of the notification thresholds was made, and it is recommendable to analyse, after 10 years, the data from the previous notifications, in order to verify if the notification thresholds can be customized without risking a situation in which the costs of anticompetitive economic concentrations escaping the notification are higher than the cost saving.

The current perception in the market according to which the Competition Council in Romania can adopt decisions without political influence must be protected.

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