

Solar Under Attack

Georg Hotar is an Austrian with Czech roots. An experienced businessman, in 2008 he co-founded Photon Energy, which has been successful not only on the Czech market but also in Australia, Germany, and Italy

Martin Sedlák

Photon Energy has delivered successful projects throughout the world. Have you recently delivered any renewables projects in the Czech Republic?

The Czech state's actions have killed off the solar industry, which employed more than 15,000 people in 2010. The government has caused irreparable damage to investor confidence. Once investors were betrayed with retroactive measures, such as the solar levy or the recycling fee, the country's reputation among investors everywhere worsened. Even if the government introduced another FIT (Feed-in Tariff) scheme, we would be very doubtful.

The situation was similar in other countries, such as Italy, Slovakia and Romania, which made us completely rethink our strategy and abandon new projects relying on government support. Instead we decided to focus on asset management for existing power plants and investment protection in Europe while exploring the grid parity market in Australia for new solar power and solar storage projects.

Can we find inspiration for utilizing renewable energy in Australia's system?

Solar power in Australia is interesting, not only because of abundant sunshine but the variety of applications and intelligent support schemes. Despite anti-renewables rhetoric from the pro-coal government, solar is a viable option for power users.

The Czech Republic could definitely learn from the "Small Technical Certificates" (STC) support scheme for rooftop PV

installations below 100 kWp. STCs effectively secure initial investments and motivate building owners to convert unused rooftops. STCs also allow for smart financing, such as power purchase agreements or solar leasing.

The real estate sector has welcomed rating systems; tenants now prefer office space in energy efficient buildings. Having solar electricity means being able to calculate energy costs from day one.

So, you view rooftop solar energy as insurance against growing electricity costs?

Absolutely. With solar energy the costs are more or less known and can be easily calculated, unlike when buying power from the grid. Last year we delivered a solar storage project for a telecom infrastructure provider with long-term customer contracts. For them being able to generate their own power and locking in energy prices is a godsend.

You have experience in countries throughout the world—from Germany to Australia. In the Czech Republic, solar investors have had to face repeated retroactive changes to guaranteed conditions. Is the Czech Republic a textbook example of how not to approach renewables?

It's even worse. The Czech Republic paved the way for retroactive measures elsewhere. It was a green light for other irresponsible governments who felt they could do what they want to investors.

How do you view the current pressure the Czech government is putting on the Euro-



Photos: Photon Energy



pean Commission to wheedle it into granting the authority to make further changes in guaranteed conditions by notifying the no-longer valid Renewables Act?

We are particularly worried. The EC has already set out on a collision course with many international investors. It left solar investors out to dry when they came for help against the solar levy, and now it is going even further by attacking the very system that the investors' confidence is based on: bilateral investment treaties and international arbitrations. In the Micula case, when two investors sued the Romanian

state and won, the EC blocked a reparation payout by claiming that it would constitute illegal state support for a private company.

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Therefore, we expect the worst from the EC and are currently advising solar investors to restructure their assets outside the EU to ensure bilateral investment treaty protection.

You regularly meet with foreign investors; have they given you any feedback on the instability created in the Czech Republic due to the retroactive measures? Has the willingness of foreign investors to take on new Czech projects been impacted?

What politicians must understand is that by attacking renewable energy investors they attack investors as a whole. Most investors do not only have RE portfolios but are active in many sectors, including rene-

wables. So, such actions affect not only the energy sector but the economy as a whole.

Will batteries or electric vehicles play an important role in the future of the energy sector?

Both will help make solar energy universally applicable. Batteries will help push forward a decentralised energy economy, and we will surely see more rooftops covered in solar panels.

E-cars could represent an interesting revenue stream for owners of parking facilities or even local governments, who could add solar charging stations to Park&Ride facilities. But it is crucial that long-running, investor-detering anti-solar campaigns are stopped. If governments want to lower emissions and create jobs in the renewables sector, the help of investors is needed.

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Photo: Plzeňský Prazdroj

Tap masters

Lukáš Vitásek of Restaurace na Hradčanské in Prague 6 (pictured in the centre) has been named 2015's Pilsner Urquell Master Bartender. In addition to the title, Vitásek also won an opportunity to make his very own pilsner-style beer under the supervision of Plzeňský Prazdroj's senior maltster Václav Berka, and to go on a trip to selected European taprooms that serve pilsner lagers from tanks. The runner-up spot in the tenth annual competition went to Martina Navrátilová from Plzeň-based restaurant Lokál Pod Divadlem, followed by Jan Bejšovec from Prague's Konvikt in third place

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Anniversary celebration

Prague-based English-Czech PR agency Best Communications invited friends and clients to join in a 20th anniversary celebration. In addition to the presence of a number of bulldogs, the event, held on the Kampa Island in Prague, was attended by over 200 guests



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