

Warsaw lithium-ion batteries

In late 2020, the value of export of lithium-ion batteries reached some EUR400 million a month, and they now account for as much as 2 percent of all Poland's exports. That amounts to almost a third of European demand for electric vehicle batteries.

"Poland is very high up in the supply chain for the electric car sector. It is the fifth-biggest global supplier of lithium-ion car batteries or their components and the biggest one in Europe," said Jan Wiśniewski from PSPA, Poland's e-mobility and alternative fuels association.

Poland's scale is mostly due to an LG factory in Kobierzyce in the southwest of the country. The Korean company's facility is Europe's biggest factory of batteries for e-vehicles, producing 20 gigawatt-hours worth a year. It's on course to become the biggest globally after the company announced a Polish government-supported EUR300 million expansion to produce 100 GWh worth of batteries a year. That is an estimated 60 percent of Europe's current demand.

LG is not the only manufacturer choosing Poland to make lithium-ion car batteries or related products. Belgium's Umicore is planning to build a battery component factory in central Poland and another one in Radzikowice in the southwest.

Electric vehicle (EV) manufacturers are also eyeing other Central European countries. Korea's SK Innovation said last month that it plans to spend \$2.3 billion to build a 30 GWh plant in Hungary; it already has two, one of them producing 7.5 GWh of batteries a year and another making 10 GWh. Slovakia's InoBat Auto aims to build a 10 GWh plant in conjunction with Wildcat Discovery Technologies of the U.S.

Central Europe looks to replicate the model that made it a force to be reckoned with in the production of gasoline and diesel cars. The region doesn't have any significant domestic carmakers, instead it's relied on its cheap but skilled labor and close ties to carmaking hubs including Germany to build up huge car industries.

Poland hosts factories for Volkswagen, Fiat, Toyota and Opel as well as making trucks, buses and a vast number of subassemblies and components. Slovakia is the world's largest per capita car producer, while the industry is also crucial to the economies of Hungary and the Czech Republic.

The trick is going to be for those countries to shift to final assembly of electric cars. For the moment, Central European countries largely host battery and parts plants, while EV production is mostly concentrated in Western Europe.

The region's dalliance with foreign battery makers isn't entirely in line with the European Union's effort for the bloc to become self-sufficient in battery cell production by 2025, responding to what it sees as a

competitive threat from Asian companies such as LG and its Chinese rivals that now dominate the market.

"I am confident that by 2025, the EU will be able to produce enough battery cells to meet the needs of the European automotive industry -- and even to build our export capacity," European Commission Vice President Maro? ?ef?ovi?saidin November.

That same trend can be seen in the rest of the region. Only 918 new EVs were registered last year in Slovakia, and Hungary saw 3,046, according to ACEA, the European car lobby. Electric cars tend to be much more popular in wealthier parts of the Continent.

The Polish government has dreams of the country building its own e-car. The government last year unveiled the Izera, a demonstration version of Poland's EV. Electromobility Poland wants to launch production in 2023 with plans to sell 60,000 in the first year of production, growing to over 100,000 in subsequent years -- although experts question whether that's realistic.

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