

The need for a debate on the shale gas in Europe European National Geological Surveys have their role to play



The discussion on shale gas is becoming more and more interesting over the recent years. The issue attracts attention of all stakeholders including global media, academia, NGO's, communities and central authorities alike. In many places it is also of high social profile.

The shale gas revolution that took place in USA alerted the entire world on unconventional gas, including Parliament, Commission and almost all European Union Member States. The debate on "unconventional" upstream went through many EU countries with surprising results. Starting with Poland being most advanced in its shale gas programme ending with France where there is a practical ban on shale gas projects to mention two extremes. The debate is of different nature in each country, it has different momentum and different political and social background and, last but not least, it is of a very different quality in terms of arguments applied. Every discussion should aim to understand real benefits and real challenges of a given issue. In case of shale gas phenomenon it should touch upon social and economic benefits and environmental risks. Only after considering and analyzing real advantages and disadvantages of the shale industry we can make the discussion comprehensive and factual. Unless we secure open and factual debate we face a risk of escalating emotions instead of studying facts and examining their consequences, where the role of science and expertise is crucial. In case only advantages shall be considered we may end up with uncontrolled effects on the environment. If, on the other hand, only challenges shall be addressed we may easily over regulate the sector and consequently relegate it from Europe to other regions.

Geology is a science. And like other sciences it is in a constant search for truth. Karl Popper, the philosopher of science once said that science was in search for truth but never for certainty. We are all aware of the limits of science, we are also aware of great benefits of scientific studies which can hardly keep away from sincere and balanced discussion.

This is particularly important in case of the shale gas, where the debate tends to be emotional rather than factual. The technology of hydraulic fracturing has been exercised across Europe for more than six decades and even longer in USA. Although on limited scale, it was practised by the upstream industry widely and its application was accepted by the competent authorities and independent research institutes as a safe and secure method for enhancing oil and gas recovery. What has happened between then and now? Why the attitude to fracking is so different now with over half a century of experience all over the world? Having permits for hydraulic fracturing suspended in Germany for two years, a ban on fracking in France since 2011, and an intense debate on it in some other countries like Austria we may come to a conclusion that with shale gas revolution in USA, our European perception of the technology has also undergone a revolution. However in a negative sense.

The role of geology, a science seen as a space for open and factual debate is even more needed than ever. Being aware of limits of any science and that no certainty is granted, we should continue our efforts to find the truth on shale gas. The prominence of the National Geological Surveys in Europe is widely recognized. The NGS'es expertise authorizes them best to address the real risks and benefits of natural gas from unconventional sources. It also charges NGS'es with particular duties. The geologist may do lot more to equip the decision makers as well as the society in knowledge. The discussion in whole Europe, from UK through Poland, Romania, France, Austria and the Netherlands could be more substantial if we make our voice louder. Only then, we can expect political leaders and regulators to make reasonable decisions. However, we need to practice. And we need to practice at home. Aborting practice through regulation will lead us to nowhere.

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