

In stark contradiction with the urgent need and ambitious measures taken to end Europe's dependence on fossil fuels, the Bulgarian government is working to join a fossil gas prospecting project in the Black Sea.

In late July, the Energy Committee of the Bulgarian parliament tasked energy minister Rumen Radev with negotiating the state's participation in offshore fossil gas explorations in Block 1-21 Khan Asparuh. The minister will explore the possibility for state-owned **Bulgarian Energy Holding** to join the **OMV Petrom-TotalEnergies** consortium as a 20 per cent shareholder ahead of the exploratory drilling scheduled for 2024. This comes after the Energy Committee heard from TotalEnergies about the company's plans for future exploration wells and potential findings.

There is a clock ticking on this. The consortium's exploration in the Black Sea has been ongoing since 2012; the license has since been extended a few times, but unless a geological discovery is registered, the current extension, due to expire in late 2024, is the final one, according to the law. Previous explorations have failed to identify viable gas reserves, and in 2020 the third partner in the original consortium, Repsol, left the project. **Bulgaria has managed to decrease its dependence on Russian fossil gas over the last year, and this is a step in the right direction.** At the same time, the country is in a favorable position to reduce its gas demand overall due to the relatively small share of fossil gas in its energy mix. Developing a new fossil gas field in Bulgaria would only undermine this effort.

Bulgaria's aspirations to develop Block 1-21 Khan Asparuh in the Black Sea carry high risks – both economic and environmental. Although the plan is to export most of this gas, should it be discovered, the trend is that gas demand is falling – in Europe it fell by 17.7 per cent between August 2022 and March 2023, according to Eurostat.

Any transportation of gas from a fossil gas field in the Black Sea could take a toll on marine ecosystems. There is also a high risk of the release of volatile organic compounds (VOC) from the exploitation of the gas field, as well as the release of the potent greenhouse gas methane.

According to an analysis by the International Energy Agency (IEA), in order to meet the targets set in the Paris Agreement for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, new oil and gas fields should not be developed at all.

In 2021, Bulgaria, alongside more than 100 other countries, committed to reducing methane emissions by 30 per cent by 2030 compared to 2020 levels. New methane and gas legislation obligations are currently being finalised at the European level as part of the Fit for 55 legislative package.

Yet the Bulgarian government is advancing its Black Sea gas ambitions while another controversial Black Sea gas production project is also pushed through in Romania. And OMV is involved in both.

New fossil gas extraction projects in Bulgaria must not be allowed. Areas where local gas exploration and drilling has been discussed such as Dobrudzha, where Bulgaria's wheat production comes from, are particularly sensitive. Following the ban on shale gas extraction through fracking in Bulgaria in 2012, there has been interest in using conventional gas extraction methods in the region, which triggered waves of protests by locals. Even conventional gas extraction methods cause water and soil pollution, which would be detrimental to the region known as the 'breadbasket of Bulgaria'.

According to a UN report, Bulgaria, and more specifically northern Bulgaria and the Danube basin, is seriously threatened by droughts. Fossil gas production requires large quantities of water, in addition to polluting water sources, which would tax the country's already precarious water supply.

Considering the significant economic, social and environmental risks, environmental group Za Zemiata (Friends of the Earth Bulgaria) is urging decision makers to rethink the development of any new fossil gas fields on Bulgarian territory, regardless of whether these are offshore drillings in Black Sea or onshore drillings.

What Bulgarians need now is a just [energy transition](#), moving away from fossil fuels while providing access to affordable energy from cleaner and more reliable [renewable sources](#) and ensuring the redevelopment of fossil fuel-dependent regions. Unlike fossil fuels, sustainable forms of renewable energy are becoming ever more affordable and have minimal risks. Electricity transmission and storage technologies are already available, and access to renewables for individual consumers and municipalities would make a strong impact on achieving sustainable energy goals and strengthening energy security in the country.

Source: Bankwatch