

European Commission has been urged to stop supporting and funding fossil gas projects in the Western Balkans

The European Commission has been urged to stop supporting and funding fossil gas projects in the Western Balkans, instead focussing on sustainable energy, by a group of civil society organisations from the region.

Western Balkan countries such as Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are heavily reliant on fossil fuels, particularly coal. Albania, while generating almost 100% hydropower, exports much of it and is then forced to buy back fossil fuels from neighbouring countries at a higher price.

The coalition of organisations, totalling 36, addressed a letter to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen calling for an end to gas dependence.

“We therefore request that the European Commission refrain from promoting new gas infrastructure in the Western Balkans, whether in public statements or in its investments such as those under the Economic and Investment Plan. Instead, we ask the Commission to redouble its efforts to encourage genuinely transformative investments which are receiving insufficient attention in the Western Balkans,” the letter reads.

It notes that the signing of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda in November 2020, commits to decarbonisation by 2050 which requires the cessation of using fossil fuels. While the Balkans are not yet highly gas dependent, governments plan to greatly expand its use and have been “actively encouraged by the European commission.”

In February alone, the EU Ambassador to Serbia helped to launch works on the new Serbia-Bulgaria gas pipeline, partially funded by an EU loan and grant. EU officials have also issued statements promoting gas as a summit in Baku. This includes presenting Azeri gas as a way to phase out coal and decarbonise economies, and Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi hoping for more strategic gas projects.

Azerbaijani gas is problematic as the ruling regime grapples with issues of corruption at a high level, particularly involving gas deals. Furthermore, the Azerbaijani Laundromat is a EUR 2,9 billion slush fund being used to bribe EU politicians, lobby the EU, Council of Europe and UNESCO, and pay kickbacks related to business and gas interests.

The organisations condemned the EU for actively encouraging gas and using “unsupported claims about its benefits”.

Instead, they should focus on “Much-needed investments such as tackling electricity distribution losses, increasing the use of heat pumps and deep renovation of residential buildings do not receive half as much public attention as gas does”, noting these are essential for a sustainable energy transition.

Failure to do so will “lead us down a blind alley, to a new fossil fuel lock-in,” while costing a lot and taking many years.

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“The alternative to Russian gas for most of the Western Balkans is not Azeri gas, nor LNG or any other gas. It is an energy efficient economy based on sustainable forms of renewable energy,” the letter states.

The organisations ask the EU to focus on the renovation of buildings, increased use of heat pumps, development of rooftop photovoltaics and solar thermal, tackling electricity distribution losses, and support for technologies such as heat storage.

In March, Bankwatch, one of the signatories of the letter called on the EU to stop using taxpayer money to fund Balkan gas projects. They said more than EUR 29 billion was earmarked for non-sustainable projects in the region.

“The list contains many projects which appear reasonable and much-needed, but many others are not in line with EU policy and/or legislation and must not be funded with EU money,” the briefing states, Exit reports.