

Controversies over shale gas are mounting in the Czech Republic

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On 25 May, a group of Czech senators from the areas where possible deposits of shale gas have been discovered announced that they had prepared a bill imposing a ban on the use of the hydraulic fracturing method in the Czech Republic. Several weeks earlier, a similar bill was announced by all the hejtmans (governors) of the Czech regions, led by Michal Hasek, hejtmán of the South Moravian Region, member of parliament and deputy president of the opposition Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD). An alternative solution has been put forward by the Ministry for the Environment, which wants a moratorium on the use of hydraulic fracturing to be imposed for approximately two years. In the opinion of the head of this ministry, Tomas Chalupa, this could allow the law to be adjusted to new conditions and the controversies linked to this extraction technology to be cleared up.

Two licences for shale gas exploration have been granted in the Czech Republic to date – in the vicinity of Nachod and Trutnov close to the Polish border and in eastern Moravia. All exploration work has been halted due to the appeals procedures initiated by local governments. This April Chalupa decided to cancel the licences and reconsider the application for the licence concerning the Trutnov site. The decisions concerning the third licensed site located to the west of Prague has not been taken for procedural reasons.

Commentary

- Controversies over shale gas extraction are not yet an essential topic in the national debate. However, this subject has given rise to strong emotions in the regions where shale gas extraction is possible. As regional elections combined with elections to the Senate (one third of the seats) scheduled for autumn this year are approaching, the shale gas topic is more and more likely to be turned into a political issue, and local governments are also becoming increasingly active. However, the axis of the dispute does not run along political divisions; the ban on hydraulic fracturing is supported by activists from the governing and the opposition parties alike, and not one local politician has dared to openly back shale gas extraction.
- The greatest controversies in the Czech debate over shale gas result from the fact that the licensed sites are partly located in protected areas, as a consequence of which the exploration of shale gas is opposed not only by local government representatives and ecological activists but also, for example, by geologists from the Czech Academy of

Sciences and the managements of the national parks and protected landscape areas. The arguments which supporters of shale gas exploration are using are additionally weakened by the fact that so far there are no reliable estimates of the size of the shale gas deposits in the Czech Republic, and the prevalent opinion is that its possible output will be so low that it will have no major impact on the country's energy balance.

- It is quite unlikely that the Czech parliament will impose a total ban on hydraulic fracturing. In turn, it is very possible that the idea to introduce a moratorium on the use of this technology as put forward by the minister for the natural environment will be realised. The Czech government is at the moment very cautious about the shale gas issue, and is refraining from taking sides decisively. However, at the same time, Prague is interested in high-volume shale gas production in Poland, hoping that this will cause a reduction in gas prices. The controversies over shale gas in the Czech Republic are likely to be used by opponents of the hydraulic fracturing method at the EU forum.