

IES Policy Forum: The Politics of Shale Gas **Friday 15 March 2013, 12.30-14.00h**

On Friday, 15 March 2013, the IES organized a policy forum on “The Politics of Shale Gas”. Prof. Dr. Andreas Goldthau of the Central European University in Budapest, Torsten Wöllert, Deputy Head of the Low Carbon Technologies Unit of the European Commission’s DG Clima and Dr. Geert De Cock of the NGO Food & Water Europe presented European and US perspectives on shale gas.

Prof. Dr. Andreas Goldthau opened the event with a presentation on research that he conducted on the politics of shale gas in Poland and Bulgaria. Shale gas policies vary significantly across Europe, notably in Russia-dependent Central Eastern Europe. Most strikingly, Bulgaria has banned shale gas exploration and production, whereas Poland remains firmly committed to fostering it despite obvious drawbacks and stalling progress. Prof. Goldthau investigated the reasons for these varying outcomes in shale gas policies in Poland and Bulgaria, despite the fact that both countries share similar characteristics in the very environment informing their energy policies. He focused on the regulatory structure in the national energy sector, levels of regulation and regulatory power, and the involved actors. His findings showed that the process was decisive. In Bulgaria, shale gas exploration permits have been withdrawn due to public distrust in the government. In Poland, a regime has been built around shale gas in which all stakeholders are incorporated and the economic benefits of shale gas are highlighted. These two different stories show that the stakeholder process and discourse matter.

Torsten Wöllert presented the EU perspective on shale gas, in particular with regard to climate aspects. The European Commission is in the process of developing an EU framework on shale gas: a set of common rules on how to deal with this unconventional fuel that will ultimately be transposed into national law. Developing this framework includes undertaking reviews based on scientific data about the environmental impact of shale gas and its impact on climate change (its carbon footprint). However, it is difficult to get access to reliable data. An important issue to deal with is to make sure that regional authorities will have enough capacity to ensure that the rules will be applied and enforced in the end.

Dr. Geert De Cock turned to the politics of shale gas in the US. He voiced skepticism that shale gas could and should play a role in the transition phase towards a low carbon society. The US started with shale gas fracturing about eight years ago. Rising natural gas prices made shale gas exploitation economically viable. Forecasts predict that production will grow until 2040. As a consequence of shale gas exploitation, natural gas prices have decreased significantly. Also, landowners get royalties from the shale gas production on their land. However, shale gas can have negative impacts on the environment (such as groundwater contamination) and human health and there is still much uncertainty about its potential side effects and its carbon footprint.

The presentations were followed by a discussion with the audience about, among others, the link of shale gas exploration with the development towards a low carbon society in the EU and access to reliable scientific data on shale gas fracturing.