
Environmentalists protesting first oil rig in Montenegro

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Montenegro's oil and gas exploration, which officially began last year, is set to show its first results next year. In the first quarter of 2020, the first oil rig in the Montenegrin undersea is expected when it will be known whether there is oil and gas in that part of the Adriatic Sea, and what are the reserves.

Montenegro has granted foreign companies concessions to seek oil, thus joining other countries in the Adriatic region that have oil platforms earlier. The director of the Montenegrin Hydrocarbon Authority, Vladan Dubljevic, tells DW that the concessioners, the Italian-Russian consortium Eni-Novatek and the Greek company Energean, have so far performed the so-called 3D geophysical survey of the undersea. During that exploration, at least one geological formation was discovered where it is possible to find oil and gas, and drilling will begin there.

“The first exploration rig will be outside the territorial waters of Montenegro, about 22 kilometers from the coast”, says Dubljevic.

Exploring offshore oil and gas is, an uncertain job that can generate huge profits, but it may also be that oil is not found in sufficient quantities. So far, Eni and Novatek have invested as much as six million euros in the underwater recording, and Energean 3.5 million. However, it is only after the first geological structure is drilled that one will know the perspective of this whole story.

The search for oil and gas is also accompanied by protests by environmental organizations in all countries that reach the Adriatic Sea. In Montenegro, environmentalists also held a four-day protest march late last year, traversing the entire 300-km-long coastline. The goal, they said, was to alarm the public about the harmful effects of those researches. Mirsad Kurgas of the “SOS for Montenegro” network claims for DW that the whole business of oil and gas exploration is wrapped in a veil of secrecy.

“Most of the documentation related to oil and gas exploration has been declared a state secret. There are state institutions that have it in their job description, but they say nothing and even look at it favourably. For example, the Institute of Marine Biology is, as the only scientific an institution of its kind, in 2003, when doing identical research, was against it. Now they support it, so they are among the most responsible for this situation, “Kurgas believes.

He claims that other countries are slowly abandoning their search for oil in this way, and recalls the catastrophic consequences of the oil spill in Patagonia this year and in the Gulf of Mexico eight years ago. He adds that Norway has decided to take a radical turn in this area this year and will give up “oil mining”.

“There is no example in the world that concessions were made as close to the coast as is the

case here, "Kurgas states, reminding that Montenegro is vulnerable to earthquakes and that offshore oil drilling would only intensify it.

Oil platforms brought no benefits to Italy, marine life was exterminated

On the other hand, there are as many as 1,500 exploratory rigs in the Adriatic Sea, the most in Italy and in Croatia and Albania. Kurgas, however, points out that oil platforms have not benefited Italy.

"Their northern marine life was killed, and in the south they had to impose restrictions on exploration," says an environmental activist, adding that oil rigs would destroy Montenegrin tourism, otherwise the country's main economic branch, because tourists would not want to swim on beaches from which they can see the platforms.

Dubljevic, however, points out that Montenegro is the only country on the Adriatic that has tourism and no oil industry, and that there are no problems in Italy, Croatia and Albania because of that.

"In Greece, too, we have an example where the oil industry is successfully coexisting with tourism. Just five kilometers from Thassos Island, which is a well-known tourist destination, there has been an oil platform for almost 40 years," Dubljevic notes.

He also reveals that any platforms in Montenegrin territorial waters will not even be installed for at least another three years, but they may not be installed at all.

"Oil and gas production is not only done through platforms, now so-called factory-ships are being increasingly used for the storage, production and transshipment of oil and gas, as well as underground installations that are not even visible from the shore," explains Dubljevic.

"Danger for everyone"

Environmentalists also claim that this research is devastating not only to the marine life, but also to the general population.

"We have no results on how this research has influenced the living world in the sea. However, the experiences of our fishermen say that these surveys, the so-called seismic bombing, very damaging because they break the food chain in the sea. By destroying small organisms in the sea, such as plankton and shrimp, you also destroy the food chain," warns Kurgas.

However, Dubljevic cites the example of Norway, which is the fifth oil producer in the world,

and the primary economic “This shows that it is possible for the oil industry to co-exist with other industries. Although the risks of this type of research are minimal, all precautions have been taken. Environmental protection is our absolute priority,” emphasizes Dubljevic.

He explains that during the survey, experts were present on the ships monitoring the environmental parameters, and the concessionaires are obliged to pay any potential damage, through insurance.

"No research has been reported to date that could indicate a negative impact of 3D imaging on marine biodiversity," Dubljevic concludes.

If oil and gas are found in the Montenegrin underwater, the state will ultimately take between 62 and 68 percent of net profits. The formation of an oil fund is also planned, modeled on Norway's richest in the world and serving as a cash reserve for future generations. The Montenegrin oil fund would flow most of the potential revenue from oil and gas production, up to 85 percent, and the money would, as in the case of Norway, be further "fertilized" by investing in stocks and saving.

Despite all this, environmentalists say they will continue to protest.

“We have a drastic silence on the system globally, because we've been talking about this since 2003, but nobody listens to us. The media do not often write about this, and even some NGOs have become silent. We will continue protests and there is definitely no giving up,” says Kurgas.

Source: blic.rs