

In northern Poland, villagers are struggling against shale gas exploration that threatens to transform their lands and livelihoods.

by Blog Admin

*Shale gas exploration, or 'fracking', is on the rise, and is not without controversy with many concerned about its potential for environmental damage. In northern Poland, gas and oil exploration companies are increasingly making use of the technique with the full support of the government. **Edyta Materka** looks at the response of local villagers and Kashubians – a Polish-German ethnic group – who are forming coalitions and pressure groups to challenge the exploitation of their ethnic lands and the threat to their agrarian livelihoods.*



Ethnic minority rights and agrarian livelihoods have been compromised during shale gas exploration in agriculturally rich, northern Poland. Since August 2010, Poland's Ministry of the Environment has [given concessions](#) to global and national oil, energy and gas companies covering 85% of the region. For the first time since the [Solidarity Movement](#) of the 1980s, villagers and Kashubians—a Polish-German ethnic group—have formed local and international coalitions to roll-back state shale interests from their private fields and protect their agrarian territory.

Shale gas exploration transforms rural landscapes. In the exploratory phase, concession-holders conduct seismological testing that [weakens](#) housing and water infrastructure. If shale is discovered, a rig is built by transporting heavy machinery that damages roads and agricultural fields. Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, begins by injecting millions of gallons of water, sand and chemicals underground under high pressures to crack the shale and access the gas trapped between the shale rock. The 3-5 million gallons of water required per fracking site are extracted from local rivers, creeks and lakes. The chemical cocktail [includes](#) over 500 chemicals including benzene (a known carcinogen), methanol, hydrochloric acid, and sodium hydroxide. Water used in fracking that is left in evaporated pits requires close monitoring; however left-behind flowback water can also bring chemicals back to the surface and spread across fields. One exploration site can create village-wide ecological damage after the company moves on to exploit another site.



Kashubians have protested by refusing to sign consent forms and 'blocking' their fields as a group, [staging road blockages](#) to stop geophysical services trucks from entering fields where they suspect informed consent was not given, stealing cables from drill rigs, [signing petitions](#) to multiple levels of government, pressuring their local governments to impose village moratoria and use public land for other investments (e.g. ecotourism). In retaliation, companies like PGNiG, one of Poland's largest gas and oil exploration companies which has a 72% state ownership, have turned to the State Treasury and Poland's Agricultural Market Agency (ARR) that own un-privatised, socialist-era, ex-state farm land on their concessions. Exploration on state farms adjacent to 'blocked' fields is still ecologically hazardous. To increase mobility for concession-holders, [a new geological and mining law](#) in effect since January 2012 has authorised

concession-holders to expropriate private property and take resistant owners [to court](#). The new law allowed municipalities and voivodeships (Polish administrative regions) to freeze investment within resistant local governments to [‘make room’](#) for concession-holders. Private property and local governance — two pillars of transition into capitalism that have protected ethnic minorities in this region — have been severely compromised.

The state has only supported pro-shale gas research. The [environmental report](#) on one of the exploratory wells has concluded that with the exception of ‘loud noise’, fracking did not generate ‘any pollution’, nor ‘any impact of the treatment on quality of surface and ground water’ nor ‘any ground vibrations or shaking’ which risked infrastructure. A PGNiG report on Halliburton’s fracking procedure on its exploratory well in Markowola showed ‘no adverse impact on the environment’ and depicted an idyllic image of planted serradella on the field where the rig had been disassembled. At the same presentation, the Treasury Minister Mikołaj Budzanowski claimed that ‘Environmental devastation was the main argument for the opponents of exploration in the search of shale gas. Today, it has been taken down.’ At the XXI Forum Ekonomicznego in Krynica, he [added](#) that ‘Chemical substances used in hydraulic fracturation are allowed to be used. Analyses about their harmful effects is manipulation’.

This pro-shale political mentality is also used as a strategy on the EU level. Polish MEP Bogusław Sonik’s March 2012 [report](#) claimed that ‘no official or reputable sources have demonstrated any systematic connection between shale gas and shale oil extraction and human or animal health’, that no reputable sources have proven adverse effects to drinking water, and that ‘Sadly, public discourse has included willful suppression of some data and much extrapolation from hypothetical or individual incidents’. Poland dismisses research and public discourse that challenges its political agenda.

Villagers do not believe government reports or state geologists [who attend village meetings](#) with company representatives to persuade locals to support shale gas exploration. Instead, they invite their own experts from universities to village meetings and distribute information to the media, and [show the Joshua Fox’s ‘Gasland’ \(2010\)](#) as an education tool to counter the state’s pro-shale stance. They have had some international support. No Fracking France, for example, [sent educators](#) to give presentations about shale in the villages. Civil society groups have also formed, such as the Kashubian-Pomeranian Association which [rejects](#) the influx of heavy machinery and technologies into their territory; demands accessible details of the exploration process; calls for the state monitoring of firms’ activities; wants local representation in the legislative process to ensure that agricultural interests are respected. Polish ‘fractivists’ have [stormed conferences](#), e.g. Shale Gas World Europe 2011, occupied the state and called out all the villages who could not afford to attend but that were in solidarity against exploration.

MEP Bogusław Sonik’s report claimed that exploitation of national resources was a Member State ‘prerogative’ and [did not necessitate EU regulations](#). Shale gas exploration, however, is an ethnic and agricultural issue that requires immediate EU attention. The good news is that on September 19, MEPs in the European Parliament’s environment committee [voted](#) 63 to 1, with 1 abstention on a non-binding resolution that calls for more robust national and EU laws and monitoring of the shale gas exploration. The bad news is that EU-level action is terribly delayed—Exxon, for example, had already withdrawn its exploration process back in June 2012, years after exploratory drilling on rural and ethnic landscapes. Lastly, while commercial shale gas prospects are uncertain, the state’s subversion of minority rights and rural livelihoods to push exploration forward at all costs raises questions about its commitment to the democratic process.



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