

## **Beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century vision of the energy future of the Balkans**

Europe tends to see the Balkans as a road that can take you from Paris or Vienna to the places that matter – Constantinople, Cairo or Bagdad. In the mind of many Europeans the Balkans are just an alternative, and easily avoidable as we can see from the Nabucco pipeline saga, last leg of the Silk Road. And what travellers naturally want is the roads to be safe. Not more than that. This is a view from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and before and it is still valid.

Balkan countries have gratefully adopted this perception. A popular political dream there is to be a route rather than a destination. Governments in the Balkans do not think how to connect Sofia and Tirana, they think how to connect Sofia and Vienna and Tirana and Vienna. That is why if you want to get from Sofia to Tirana you have to fly to Vienna and then take a plane to Tirana. The distance is the same as that between Amsterdam and Paris – a 3 hour train journey.

If you look at the European Commission's map of the European energy infrastructure priorities<sup>1</sup> you will see that the Balkans are defined simply as the "Southern Gas Corridor". The Balkans are not perceived as a resource, despite the fact that they have more energy resources than other European regions. This view is archaic and prejudicial and it places not only the Balkans but also the rest of Europe in a losing political and economic.

True, the Balkans do not have the policies, the confidence and the cooperation needed to capture the region's renewable energy potential. But they have the natural and human resources to do it. (And they even include the only European country other than Norway with 100% renewable electricity.) However the idea of the Balkans as a centre of innovation, high technologies and renewable energy sounds as peculiar as the idea of Northern Germany being the European centre of solar power generation (which it is).

The energy roles of the individual EU countries are defined by the member states' political determination and by historic prejudice. Most of the Balkan countries are not members of the EU. For most EU members the Balkans are mainly seen as the place where the Orient Express used to go. A Balkan energy profile, that can provide energy independence and technological and economic advance for the whole region, will not be promoted from outside. And it should not.

It is a matter for Balkan politicians to fight for a 21<sup>st</sup> century energy vision. It is up to them to link the enormous renewable energy resources of Turkey with the not less strong potential of the rest of South East Europe and realise the dream of almost every single country there to become the "energy centre of the Balkans". The trouble, and the great economic and political opportunity, is that the energy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs large scale international cooperation and a level of transparency unusual for the oil and gas world. Only then can the Balkans become not only energy independent but also an energy destination linked to the rest of Europe with a parallel HVDC<sup>2</sup> Nabucco.

The Balkan governments need collective economic wisdom and confidence. That might sound like a bizarre expectation given what is happening in Greece - the richest country in South East Europe. But maybe the fate of Greece would have been different if there had been a fast train between Sofia and Tirana.

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<sup>1</sup> Energy infrastructure priorities for 2020 and beyond – a blueprint for integrated energy network, Brussels 17.10.2010

<sup>2</sup> HVDC - High-voltage, direct current is an electricity transmission system for long distance transfer of electricity with minimal loss needed for pan European transfer of renewable energy.