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The place of risk in the visions of shale gas governance in Poland

Controversies over shale gas exploration and its possible exploitation have triggered protests and conflicts in many countries in Europe. One of them is Poland where shale gas reserves are estimated to be the biggest in Europe (according to the American Energy Information Agency). For the last three years we could have observed how a debate on shale gas has been evolving in Poland and how it has remained without any clear conclusions with regard to possible ways of shale gas governance.

The main goal of the paper is to reconstruct visions of governance that emerge from the public debate in Poland and to analyze them through theoretical perspectives of risk governance and technology assessment. The methodological approach applied in the paper is frame analysis, led by the questions on how risks and uncertainties of shale gas are framed in the public discourse and what kind of actors promote them.

The structure of the presentation goes as follows. First, we provide an overview of the shale gas debate in Poland that is focused on controversies and matters of concern. Second we propose a theoretical framework of risk governance and technology assessment that offers various classifications of discourses on technological risks and of different modes of its governance. We propose to apply frame analysis to study the process through which actors themselves construct and classify risks and frame them as amenable to different kinds of action (legal, technical, economic). The main part of the presentation constitutes an empirical reconstruction and analysis of frames that underlie different visions of shale gas governance that emerge from the study of discursive strategies of actors involved in debates on shale gas in Poland. The empirical material comes has been gathered since the beginning of 2012 with multiple methods (media analysis, individual interviews and participant observation in various events organized around the problem of shale gas exploration in Poland) that has been funded by the National Science Foundation.