

The European Union’s embargo on Russian oil has led Greece and Bulgaria to discuss reviving the long-defunct oil pipeline project bypassing the Bosphorus. The oil pipeline would stretch from the Greek port of Alexandroupolis on the Aegean Sea, 280 kilometers to the port of Burgas on the Black Sea, and could continue as far north as the port of Constanta in Romania, Bulgarian Energy Minister Roman Hristov told Al Jazeera.

“We support the project,” said Greek Energy Minister Kostas Skrekas. The EU embargo, activated on Monday, disrupts tanker trade from Russia’s oil export terminal at Novorossiysk on the eastern Black Sea coast to EU ports on its western coast.

Since Serbia can no longer import Russian oil through the “Janaf” oil pipeline due to the sixth package of EU sanctions since December 5, the question arises whether this could be an alternative direction for our country. Even before the EU sanctions came into force, the representatives of Serbia and Hungary discussed the construction of another oil pipeline in order to avoid the current “Janaf”.

Dr. Petar Stanojević, professor at the Faculty of Security, and former assistant minister for oil and gas in the Ministry of Energy, tells “Politika” that the idea to build the “Burgas-Alexandropolis” oil pipeline is as old as the appearance of “tanker jams” at the entrance to the Bosphorus. that is, more than ten years. The Bosphorus is 700 meters wide (at its narrowest part) and with rapids, it is a bottleneck for the passage of tankers from and to the Black Sea.

- Delivery of oil to Serbia is possible in several ways. The first is that it is transported from Burgas by barges or tankers, by sea, to Constanta, and further along the Danube. The second is to transport it by sea to Varna, then by rail to the port of Ruse on the Danube and then by barge to Serbia. If it is transported by tankers, it means at least two transshipments. If it is delivered by barges that can navigate the Danube, a fleet of special pushers equipped with hydraulic devices for sea navigation would have to be acquired. A greater number of transshipments and the use of different means of transport would certainly increase the cost of transport significantly. Considering that the capacity of the barges is relatively small and that they need 10-12 days from Konstanz to Pancevo for one round, in order to supply themselves in this way, Serbia would have to approximately quadruple its fleet of barges (from 10 to 40, approximately) – emphasizes our interlocutor. Connecting Burgas with an oil pipeline to Konstanz would make sense if the branch was extended further to Odessa and if the Kazakhs who own the “Petromidija” refinery in Konstanz would give up the right to supply it with their oil. Or, if Romania discovers in this proposal a solution for its future supply of crude oil, which I think is unlikely.

- Regarding the oil pipeline, there were several ideas to connect Constanta with Pancevo. The first was to build a “Pan-European Oil Pipeline” (PEOP) all the way to Trieste, but that idea was eventually abandoned. Another cheaper and faster idea was to connect Pancevo to the existing Romanian oil pipeline that goes from Constanta to Pitesti, about 170 kilometers

long. The Romanian side always supported this thesis, but the investment was considered unprofitable due to the relatively high costs and small quantities that would be transported through this pipeline (about three to four million tons only for the “Pancevo Refinery”), and all costs would be borne by Serbia. It should not be ruled out that once unprofitable projects will become attractive for purely security reasons, especially in this turbulent time (the same applies to many gas interconnections, built or under construction) - notes prof. Dr. Stanojević.

When it comes to Serbia, he states that any idea whose goal is to have more supply routes is good. This is also the case for the oil pipeline to Hungary, mentioned here to Romania, possibly to the south to connect with the oil pipeline that goes from Thessaloniki to Skopje and others. In the current situation, when the transport of Russian oil through the EU to third countries is prohibited, the only alternative would be supply by rail from Bar, but for that, it is necessary to ensure the “flow” and capacity to transport 10,000-12,000 tons per day, which is difficult in the current conditions.

- The authorities in Serbia should think about creating spare capacities in railway locomotives and wagons, as well as barges, which would allow it to be less dependent in cases of crisis and do not cost as much as an infrastructure projectile - says Prof. Dr. Stanojević.

He adds that back in 2007, Vladimir Putin signed an agreement on the construction of this oil pipeline with the prime ministers of Greece and Bulgaria in Athens. The following year, a company for the construction and management of the oil pipeline was formed, in which the Russians had 51 percent of the shares. It was predicted that this pipeline would transport 35-50 million tons of oil per year. Its main purpose was to facilitate the export, primarily of Russian oil, and the passage of the Bosphorus Strait. Now they want to renew the idea, but the goal is for “non-Russian” oil to flow in the opposite direction, that is, from Alexandroupolis to Burgas.

- The refinery in Burgas has a capacity of about seven million tons per year and belongs to Lukoil. It is supplied with Russian oil owned by this company. As a result, Bulgaria is also exempted from the EU sanctions on the supply of crude oil by sea. This is where the first problem in this whole idea arises, that is, how to make “Lukoil” buy some “non-Russian” oil, and not resort to nationalization. It is possible that the authors of this idea have knowledge about the eventual supply of Ukraine through this route, but this requires the restoration of the destroyed refinery capacities in this country, especially in Odessa, which is a multi-year task - emphasized prof. Dr. Stanojević, Politika reports.