Making Methane Visible: From Local Leaks to EU Regulation

Ariane Desroches-Touchain

Summary

This article discusses the impact of local advocacy on tackling environmental problems at the EU level by looking at the efforts of international and local NGOs to identify and publicize methane leaks from energy infrastructures in Romania. It offers insights into how NGOs navigate the specificities of EU advocacy by cutting across scale—from the local to the global—to bring visibility to environmental problems and turn them into political concerns.

What makes a long-standing environmental problem emerge as a recognized crisis beyond the local? Energy infrastructures have become a familiar part of the landscape, not least in Romania, where the remaining substantial onshore oil and gas production in Europe is located. Among bigger infrastructures, one smaller site, Ploieşti, in Prahova County, received public attention in 2021 when national and international NGOs pointed their infrared cameras on two continuously leaking oil wells—wells that flanked a playground, situated near a high school and in a residential area. The images sparked the interest of national media, and the infrastructure was later shut down. Based on archival work on previous efforts to regulate methane leaks in the 1990s, and interviews with members of an international NGO and workers in gas-transmission companies, this piece narrates the transformation of a local environmental problem into a concern at EU level.

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Sign warning of a gas pipeline in Pragelato, Turin, Italy.

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The images of Ploiesti were produced by the Clean Air Task Force (CATF), the European branch of a US environmental NGO founded in Boston in 1996, together with the Romanian NGO 2 Celsius. In 2021, they imported a US advocacy method that consisted of using thermal cameras—the same thermal cameras used by the industry—to uncover leakages and produce images, an example of transnational transfer of protest methods. When seen through an infrared camera, otherwise-invisible leaks are revealed. Employees of CATF were trained to recognize and discuss the composition of the videotaped leaks and therefore be able to identify methane.

CATF implemented the method in Romania at the same time as the European Commission was drafting a strategy to reduce methane emissions for presentation at COP 2022 in Glasgow. The campaign was part of the advocacy strategy of an EU-level NGO coalition (Climate and Clean Air Coalition). This coalition was pushing for emission norms on imported gas, which represents most of the gas consumed in the EU. To justify such regulations, CATF and local NGOs attempted to gather evidence of the existence of multiple small leaks, rendering the invisible visible. At the time, most central and eastern European governments opposed having emission norms on imported gas.

NGOs tried to draw national attention to the problem. The location of the site in Ploieşti, next to a playground, a school, and housing, compelled the local government and the gas-transmitting company to respond, resulting in the shutdown of the infrastructure. CATF chose to produce contextualized and geographically embedded images. They focused on three countries: first on Romania, with its substantial oil and gas production, and then on Italy and Germany, which imported oil and gas. Because gas played a central role in the energy mix of these

countries, the political stakes were high.

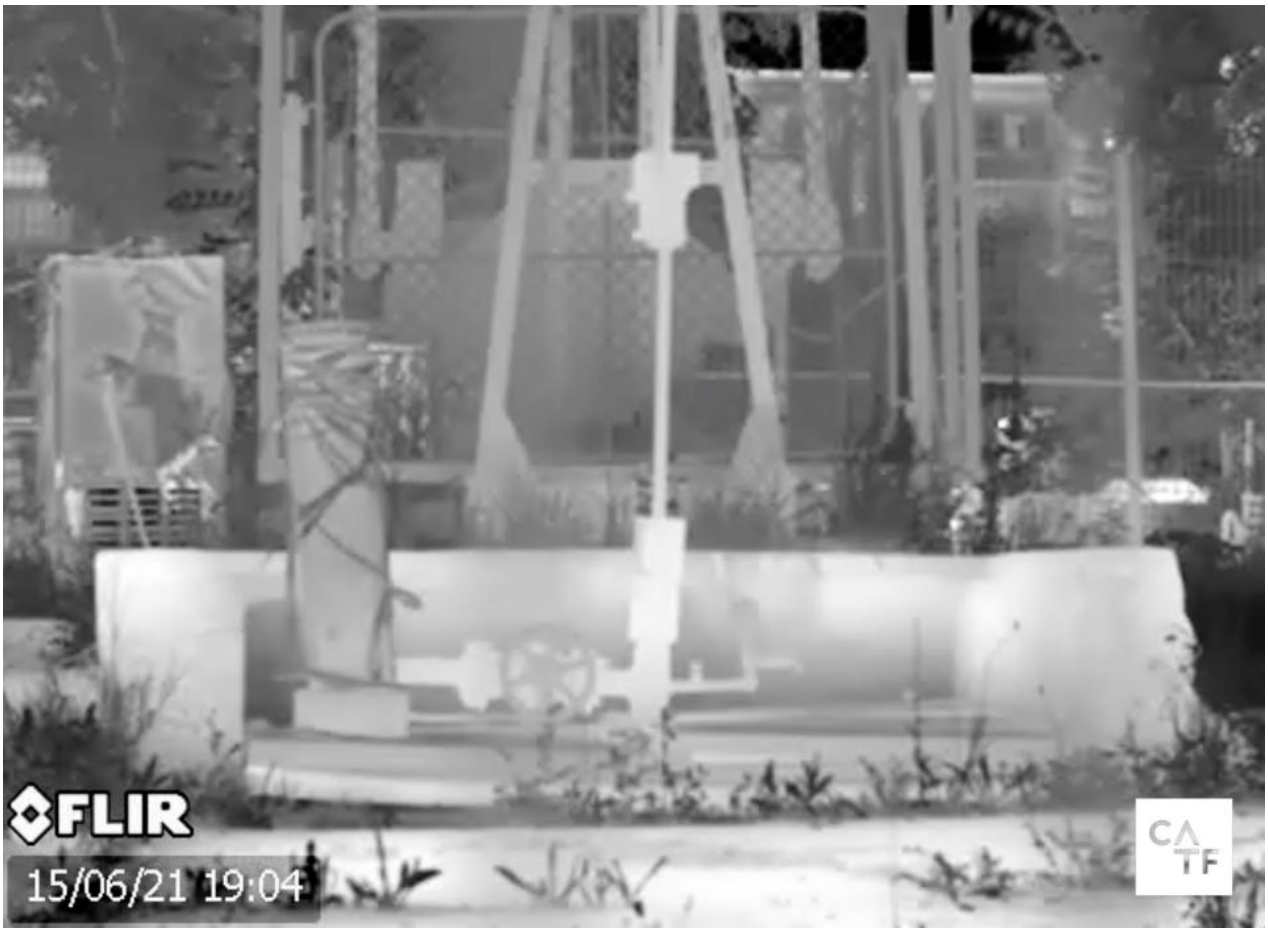
CATF corresponds to the "Entrepreneur" NGO in Greenspan, Cohen-Blankshtain, and Geva's typology: The organization focuses on promoting low-emission technological solutions with staff recruited for their advocacy and scientific expertise. Moreover, its advocacy strategy primarily targets government institutions. Among environmental NGO coalitions for the reduction of methane at the EU level, CATF was comparably conservative because it did not advocate for the end of fossil fuels.

Leaking oil and gas infrastructure next to a playground in Câmpina, Prahova County, Romania.

Between 2021 and 2023, in collaboration with local NGOs, Greenpeace Romania, and 2 Celsius, CATF documented 46 field trips to oil- and gas-transmission infrastructures in Romania: mainly wells, storage facilities, and collection and processing stations. Starting from the very local level of a seemingly well-functioning infrastructure in Ploieşti, the NGOs showed the interference between the infrastructure and its environment in a way that had been theretofore invisible. Their field trips had a threefold aim: uncovering invisible methane leaks in energy infrastructures using thermal cameras; producing images usable for press coverage; and mapping these leaks. As one of CATF's employees stated: "Most of our work, for public communications, has been using infrared imagery because it's such an effective tool to communicate about methane. We're handling and talking about an invisible gas there." The invisibility was not only due the physical properties of methane, as an invisible and odorless gas, but also because the previous policy concentrated on safety rather than health, allowing for a higher threshold on methane emissions. The images produced were used to address local politicians.

By extending field trips to other EU countries, CATF was able to produce a map displaying the leakages they documented in the EU, showing repeated occurrences of the problem. Their advocacy strategy was to cut across geographical and political scales using a single environmental problem to make it relevant at both the national and EU scales at the same time. Scaling up mattered: Smaller leaks could go unnoticed, and an individual leak was not deemed environmentally threatening. But making numerous leaks visible while focusing on Romania (where gas leaks were a politically sensitive issue for local and national governments and members of the European Parliament from Romania at the time, due to the relative importance of gas in its energy mix) proved to be a powerful strategy. The issue gained local media coverage—and in the case of Ploieşti even resulted in its shutdown—and also international media coverage. This initial success paved the way for the repetition of this method in other EU countries. The images of releases in newspapers and on television—regardless of whether they were intentional or not—then played a decisive role in scaling up the problem in size and scope and making smaller leaks relevant at the EU level.

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Infrared picture of leaking methane well in Câmpina, Prahova County, Romania.

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The visualization that documented methane leaks in Romania offers an example of the strategy of cutting across scales by turning routine local pollution into an EU environmental problem. In the Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Reduction of Methane Emissions in the Energy Sector (Regulation 2024/1787), leaks are mentioned as a source of emissions and an import standard is applied, showing that some the of Climate and Clean Air Coalition's arguments have been heard, even if some NGOs are dissatisfied with the threshold for detection and repair, which they consider too high.

Further readings:

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Related links:

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- Romania: Energy Supply. IEA Data Services. https://www.iea.org/countries/romania/energy-mix
- CutMethaneEU. Campaign Overview. https://cutmethane.eu/watch/

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