

## Source of Division: Bulgaria's Contested Green Transition

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November 14, 2023

Superficial media coverage and political polarisation are framing Bulgaria's green transition as an imposition from Brussels that will damage the country's coal-intensive economy. To prevent decarbonisation from weighing on the less well-off, Bulgaria needs forward-looking policies and clarity in communicating them.

At the end of September in Bulgaria, miners and energy workers, with the support of trade unions, blocked key road arteries to demonstrate against plans for transitioning to green energy.

The country's coal sector and the government seemed more at loggerheads than ever. On 29 September, one day before the deadline, the Council of Ministers sent the territorial plans for the Just Transition Fund (JTF) to the European Commission. This led to discontent in the sector. The protesters refused two invitations for a meeting with Prime Minister Nikolai Denkov in Sofia, and then asked him to meet them on-site. Eventually, the miners, energy workers and trade unions dropped their demand on the location of the meeting, and drew up a list of six specific demands to be discussed with the government in the National Assembly. The meeting took place on 3 October and ended with the signing of an agreement that marked the beginning of more detailed negotiations.

The Bulgarian media's coverage of the protest focused on the roadblocks and on the question of who promised what. Headlines mentioned the "uprising of the miners and energy workers", and the attempts by certain prominent political figures to "quell" it. What the media has yet to produce is explaining the situation to the public in a comprehensive and holistic way.

"Disinformation about the green transition and the European Green Deal is expected to continue, especially in the context of the local, national and European elections this year and the next," said Remina Aleksieva, analyst for the Energy and Climate Programme at the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD).

The same could be said of the political class. The media and political leaders have a shared responsibility to better inform Bulgarian citizens about the importance of the green transition and the improved quality of life it promises for future generations.

### **Lack of debate**

On 11 December 2019, the EU Commission unveiled a roadmap to turn climate change and environmental challenges into opportunities. The Green Deal is a multilateral growth strategy focused on transforming the EU economy for a sustainable future. "Cleaner air, water and soil; lower energy bills; renovated homes; better public transport and more charging points for electric cars; less waste; healthier food and better health for current and future generations" are the stated goals of the strategy.

The target of climate neutrality by 2050 means that the road ahead is narrow and challenging. For each member state, the scale of the challenge depends on local economic conditions and dependencies. In 2021, the EU Parliament adopted the EU Climate Law, which will make emission reductions legally

binding for all EU member states. It also introduced the [Fit for 55](#) legislative package, a road plan on how to reduce emissions in the EU by at least 55 per cent until 2030.

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### **Brief history of Bulgarian energy**

In the years between 1945 and 1989, under communist rule, Bulgaria had a centrally planned economy. After 1989, in the post-communist period, the country's goals were to diversify energy development, reduce dependence on Russia, and work towards sustainability. After Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, economic and political developments had an impact on energy policy. The country embarked on a journey to reduce its dependence on Russian energy, supported by a pro-EU policy.

The two biggest energy projects in the country were the Kozloduy and Belene nuclear power plants (NPPs). The Kozloduy NPP, whose construction began in 1970, was the first in Bulgaria and southeastern Europe. At the time of Bulgaria's accession to the EU, there were heated debates about the possible reopening of units III and IV of the plant after their decommissioning in 2007. This never came to pass, and the period is marked as an unsuccessful chapter in Bulgaria's EU accession. Currently, only two out of six units are in operation. The lack of comprehensible, in-depth media coverage contributed to an ill-informed public debate.

The Belene NPP project has a history of more than four decades. The project has gone through several attempts at renewal and a number of freezes. In July 2023, the Bulgarian Parliament overturned its previous decision to complete the NPP and decided to negotiate the sale of the equipment to Ukraine. Again, the media coverage was insufficient to help the public understand the matter better.

In 2022, coal energy was the main source of electricity production in Bulgaria. It accounted for 42 per cent of total electricity generation in the country, followed by nuclear energy (33 per cent). Hydro, gas, bioenergy, solar, and wind together accounted for 25 per cent. In the first five months of 2023, the overall share of coal energy fell by 7 per cent to 35 per cent. In June 2023 coal energy dropped to 17 per cent, while nuclear energy reached 47 per cent. Solar stood at 12 per cent, and hydro at 17 per cent.

### **Disinformation and dominance**

The Green Deal story in Bulgaria is a contrasting one. The Balkan country has some 43,000 people directly or indirectly dependent on the coal industry, according to Martin Vladimirov, director of the CSD's energy and climate programme. While the Green Deal offers an opportunity to modernise industry, infrastructure, and energy production, one of the biggest challenges is the lack of transparency about how this will happen for the average person in one of the EU's poorest countries. This challenge has yet to be addressed by a proper government information campaign and decent media coverage of the Green Deal. Misperception of climate policy is particularly acute in the three coal regions most affected by the

changes to the Just Transition plans – Stara Zagora, which is expected to receive the largest financial injection, Pernik, and Kyustendil.

“There has been no systematic, holistic and widespread publicity campaign by the government to explain the purpose, key aspects, and expected results and changes of the Green Deal, especially in the coal regions,” says Apostol Dyankov, Climate and Energy Programme Manager at WWF Bulgaria.

“We have been recommending this for the last two years, because unfortunately Bulgaria is the target of a general misinformation and disinformation campaign targeting the Green Deal as part of a larger hybrid communication operation aimed at discrediting Bulgaria’s EU membership,” he adds.

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Public opinion in Bulgaria tends to believe that the “green agenda” is more of an imposition from Brussels, an assertion of European dominance. According to the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), Bulgaria, classified as a “less ambitious member state”, lacks the institutional capacity and political will to implement the green transition.

Bulgaria also remains one of the most vulnerable countries in the EU to foreign influence, including media misinformation and disinformation. “Previous monitoring [by the CSD] in 2021 showed that most of the local disinformation related to the Green Deal was produced and disseminated by Bulgarian media and political and economic entities known for systematically amplifying the Kremlin’s influence,” says Aleksieva.

One of the most repeated arguments for prolonging the use of coal and fossil fuels is the lack of renewable energy technology and investment.

“This is not true for technologies, but it is true for investments. This sector is so stagnant because of aggressive anti-renewables laws and restrictions, lack of clarity in licensing, and local resistance, such as with the Vetrino project and the opposition of the local company Historical Park. [The sector is] even portrayed as belonging to oligarchs and the mafia. Bulgarians are suspicious of renewable energy. They’re much more likely to support fossil solutions, despite the climate impact and lack of economic feasibility,” says Dyankov.

### **Difficult coal phaseout**

According to Lyubomir Spasov, director of the Bobov Dol thermal power plant, nearly 1,000 jobs at the plant are at risk. If the market and economic logic dictate that they have to reduce their production because there are new alternative technologies, sooner or later the plant will cease to operate, Spasov claims. This scenario, strangely enough, seems to be coming to pass, given the development of solar technologies and the price of coal energy across Europe. What cannot happen, according to Spasov, is for the coal industry to be brought to a standstill under administrative orders.

“All transformations should be evolutionary, not revolutionary. We are struggling to make the next revolutionary leap and we are being led by people who may not know what they are talking about,” says Spasov. “They [the government] are telling us ‘these are our conditions, accept them’. That’s not

dialogue.”

The bottleneck created by the lack of public discussion of the Green Deal has inevitably led to the recent firestorm, forcing the current government to act due to looming deadlines. “The [aim] is not to change the text of three sentences and move 16 sentences somewhere else. We want a mechanism that removes the feeling of lies and deceit, the feeling that the best we can achieve is mistrust. We need a mechanism to regulate processes that affect us directly, and we need to be involved, to have our say,” explains Alexander Zagorov, national secretary of the Podkrepa trade union confederation.

In his view, the Bulgarian energy industry cannot function without thermal power plants and the real problem is the trade in emissions, not the production of coal itself. In his analysis, the danger is the EU’s Emission Trading System, not coal production.

But the government’s room for manoeuvre is limited. Bulgaria has already lost 100 million euros under the Just Transition Fund in 2022. If the territorial plans for the green transitions had not been submitted by 30 September, the country could have lost another 3.5 billion euros. If Bulgaria does not meet its commitments under the Recovery and Resilience Plan, it could lose around 17 billion euros. One such commitment is to reduce carbon emissions by 40 per cent until 2026.

### **Low media literacy**

The survival of a weak green media agenda is being tested, following five consecutive parliamentary elections in just two years in Bulgaria. The political instability and radicalisation following the results of the last parliamentary elections (April 2023) have become the country’s most immediate challenges.

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The Bulgarian media’s specific choice of words on the subject of the green transition and its impact is crucial in shaping the public’s perception of the Green Deal. Examples of headlines have included “Imminent riot against the EU’s unrealistic climate goals”, and more extreme tabloid variants such as “The Green Deal is causing the country’s inflation”.

The main issue used to challenge the EU’s green policies in Bulgaria is the potential impact of shutting down the coal industry. The pro-coal lobby claims that a functioning coal industry is an indispensable factor not only for energy independence but also for maintaining state sovereignty and national security. In 2021, more than 70 per cent of Bulgarians knew little about the Green Deal and even less about the country’s official position on the EU’s carbon neutrality target, but they did not like it and that was that.

In June 2022, another survey was published which showed that 62 per cent of the Bulgarian population thought that climate change was a real threat, but that 83 per cent did not know where the money from Bulgaria’s stimulus package was being spent. The situation is similar in 2023.

The common denominator in media coverage of the green agenda is that it either acknowledges the need to create a more sustainable future in the country and across the continent, but bashes the willingness, readiness, and ability of Bulgarian politicians to make the transition to carbon neutrality; or it denies the need for such changes altogether, often leaning towards confusing conclusions and even

deliberately misleading the public.

“Given Bulgaria’s significant vulnerability to disinformation and the low level of information literacy in the country, the strengthening of the Kremlin’s influence in Bulgarian media and political and economic institutions provides a significant headwind for Bulgaria’s ability to meet its commitments under the EU Green Deal,” says Aleksieva.

In addition to Kremlin disinformation and low media literacy, this situation is also a result of political pressure on editorial independence. Bulgaria does not have a well-functioning legal framework to regulate media ownership and provide safeguards against political interference. Bulgarian journalism has clearly failed to adequately unravel the complexity of the situation and provide any form of solution-oriented coverage.

In June 2023, the Open Society Institute Sofia reported that Bulgaria had dropped two places in the annual European Media Literacy Index ranking, from 33 in 2022 to 35 in 2023, out of 41 countries.

### **Anti-EU voices**

The April 2023 parliamentary elections saw the rise of the new Bulgarian nationalist and pro-Kremlin party Vazrazhdane (Revival). In two years it increased its score fivefold (from 2.45 per cent in 2021 to 14.16 per cent in 2023, with a low turnout of 40.69 per cent).

The rise of extreme politicians and parties and the controversies surrounding them – such as their condemnation of the COVID-19 green certificate while only a third of the entire parliamentary group was vaccinated, and branding as “fascist scum” Bulgarian citizens protesting in support of parliament speaker Nikola Minchev in 2022 – has impacted public opinion on the Green Deal. In 2022, Revival’s leader Kostadin Kostadinov labelled it as “death for the Bulgarian economy”.

“If we don’t want Bulgaria’s heart to stop beating, the thermal power plants must continue to work until the brown coal deposits in the Maritsa region are exhausted,” said Kostadinov. “The people who signed the Recovery and Resilience Plan should be sent to prison for national treason. The European Union cannot continue to exist in its current form,” he added.

### **The way ahead**

According to Dyankov, the public is beginning to see through the radicalisation. “They [the protesters] may be strong [in the] short term, but they will continue to lose support. If we go into the very unfortunate scenario where we lose the Just Transition Fund money and the plans are not adopted at all, I think it will be crushing for the coal regions themselves. They’ll lose both the money and the public support. They’re playing a very dangerous game. They’re gambling a lot on this radical protest and they could lose everything.”

Today’s events follow a long period during which politicians refused to take responsibility for commitments that Bulgaria simply cannot ignore.

“In recent months the debate has normalised. Yes, there are loud voices, but the arguments for pricing energy production are there and people are starting to look for information on the subject. I’d recommend starting with the European websites. There are decent publications in Bulgarian, but these are isolated cases. I haven’t seen systematic publications and transparency of information,” says Boris Gurov, policy advisor to the EU Parliament and assistant professor at the Economic Research Institute

at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

According to Gurov, Poland's situation with power plants was similar, and the presence of the coal industry there was significant. The difference between Bulgaria and Poland is the proper communication strategy that was adopted in the latter, which provided a comprehensible and transparent overview of the whole process.

Nevertheless, Bulgaria has shown that there is a clear pro-EU majority in the population. Aleksieva believes this should be enough to set the country on a green innovation path.

"However, further hiccups can be expected along the way, and Bulgaria's green transition journey should not be taken for granted. In particular, Bulgaria will be among the countries that will pay a high social price in terms of lost jobs and income in some areas of the country, and appropriate mitigation strategies need to be put in place quickly to protect vulnerable communities," adds Aleksieva.

*This article is part of a series dedicated to climate discourse in the European media. This project is organised by the Green European Foundation in collaboration with [Voxeurop](#) and with the support of the European Parliament to the Green European Foundation.*

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Published November 14, 2023

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/source-of-division-bulgarias-contested-green-transition/>

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