

The two NGOs - Za Zemiata and WWF Bulgaria have been promoting the idea of just transition for years, often bringing together actors with apparently opposing interests to debate the issue, for the first time in late February NGO participants had the impression the discussion was very positive and practical, centered on using the existing opportunities and finding solutions. The NGO's organised a discussion about the European Green Deal and just transition, which took place Feb. 28 at the French Cultural Institute in Sofia.

The public discussion, entitled "A Just Energy Transition and the Green Pact - Winning Opportunities for Bulgaria" brought together representatives of the central government, municipalities, civic organisations, science and business. The initiative was part of an EUKI project promoting a fair energy transition, covering partnership initiatives and know-how sharing between Germany and Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Greece, Bulgaria.

Despite having differences in priorities, participants did agree that delaying the energy transition would make it increasingly difficult to implement optimal solutions and so would have grave consequences for society and the economy.

Tsvetan Kyulanov, the Head of the Delegation of the European Commission to Bulgaria, emphasised that the European Green Deal was the new strategy for Europe's growth, integrating the urgent need for transformation and the development of clean technologies. He recalled that this direction of development was entirely determined by the European citizens who had cast their votes in the last European elections.

Atanaska Nikolova, the Bulgarian Deputy Minister of Environment, spoke about the country's readiness to implement EU goals: "At the governmental level, a coordination council already exists under the leadership of the Deputy Prime Minister, Tomislav Donchev. All ministries and agencies directly related to the Green Deal are represented in this council." Nikolova said that implementing the EU objectives connected to the Green Deal involved transforming the whole economy, changing the way society works and the way we live. For Bulgaria, she cited preserving competitiveness, economic growth, energy efficiency, technological neutrality and social justice as priorities.

Together with the Deputy Energy Minister, Zhecho Stankov, she insisted that the transition would be successful only if it is fair, smooth and national specificities are taken into account.

"We need to involve the people of the regions: if they do not feel the transition is fair, then it cannot be fair," said Minister Stankov. Asked how citizens will be included, he explained that Bulgaria is well prepared for that process and that the regulatory framework was changing to make the production of renewable energy for own use more attractive.

“The Green Deal will happen with or without us,” said coal industry representative Kristina Lazarova, Chairman of the Board of Directors of TPP Bobov Dol. Surprisingly, Lazarova joined her voice to the advocates of the Green Deal, which is in stark contrast to the fact that she heads a coal power plant with a serious carbon footprint and a source of important social and environmental problems.

Meglana Rusinova, representing the Bulgarian Photovoltaic Association, spoke about the importance of involving citizens in the transformation. She explained that the aim was to improve the quality of the environment and the competitiveness of all Member States, including those in the periphery like Bulgaria. Rusinova pointed out that one of the big victories of progressive forces in Bulgaria was to see a 30% renewable energy target included in the National Plan.

Iliana Pavlova of the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce spoke about the circular economy and research as a factor in the Green Deal.

Veselka Ivanova, Head of the Municipal Programs and Projects Department at the National Association of Municipalities, Anton Iliev, Chief Expert of the Municipality of Bobov Dol, and Stefan Krustev, Deputy Mayor of Pernik, drew attention to problems at the municipal and regional levels.

“In Bulgaria, we have been sleeping for 12 years in terms of environmental activities, we notice a mimicry and idling, while the Scandinavian and other EU Member States have worked very hard. Unfortunately, we municipalities are responsible, because we are not brave enough,” Ivanova said. She cited the European Commission report on Bulgaria, according to which our country is not adequately addressing environmental problems, which is hindering growth. According to her, an important positive development was that Bulgarian municipalities have solid experience with writing and administering European projects, as over 50% of the EU projects implemented in the country have been handled by Bulgarian municipalities.

“Between 7,000-10,000 people are employed in the coal sector and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy promised - in response to our questions - that these people would certainly not be out of work. Our role is to push for regional plans for energy and economic transition, including retraining for these people,” Todor Todorov of Za Zemiata explained.

“Once again, we have made sure that it is only through the joint efforts of all stakeholders that we can achieve a successful and equitable energy transition,” Todorov added.

“The Green Pact offers many opportunities, but they are competitive, and the largest funding will come from countries that offer meaningful and sustainable energy and economic transition plans. It is within our abilities to be one of those countries.

Source: just-transition.info