

In February and March 2023, [environmental organisation Za Zemiata \(Friends of the Earth - Bulgaria\)](#) organised several meetings in Stara Zagora and Galabovo in south-central Bulgaria dedicated to just energy transition and the development opportunities it offers the region.

The involvement of organisation at these meetings and at similar events hosted by other civil society organisations is a core element of our information campaign aimed at raising awareness in coal regions on just [energy transition](#), **Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs)** and opportunities for the development of these areas.

But we believe the task of relaying information on these important issues should not rest on the shoulders of the civil society sector. Promoting public awareness of energy transformation is in fact one of the Bulgarian government's core obligations in relation to the **Just Transition Mechanism**.

Unfortunately, we have seen a complete dereliction of this duty at the [government](#) level. Instead, the political establishment has shown far more interest in competing for people's votes in yet another snap general election set for this April, the fifth in two years. Ultimately, the general scarcity of information available to the public and the lack of transparency on how decisions affecting coal regions are made are failures of government. After all, a successful energy transition cannot be achieved if people are unaware of what the process entails or how it will impact them.

Crucially, there is no information about the potential for positive change. All that is heard is scaremongering in the media, whether it be the threats of representatives from the mines and thermal power plants or the warnings from syndicates and politicians that transitioning from coal will leave people jobless and without prospects.

At the meetings, we noted a very different sentiment from what is commonly presented in the media as 'public opinion'. When made aware of the facts, participants told us they were open to change. They also recognised the potential for alternative solutions, including the development of other industries.

In contrast to alarmist predictions of unemployment and homelessness, representatives from the local [non-governmental organisation](#) the Employers' Club, Trakia University, the Bulgarian Construction Chamber (BCC), and various enterprises active in the area all reported an issue with finding staff.

In short, the jobs are there but the workforce has been absorbed by the mines. But blocking investment in the wider industrial zone means there is no potential for it to develop, attract

more businesses and create new job opportunities.

At the meetings, we presented the guidelines for the draft TJTP for Stara Zagora and the wider region along with highlights from the Just Transition Fund. Most of the attendees had no previous knowledge of these schemes.

For two years, politicians have neglected to gauge the views, suggestions and wishes of people in the region. The decision to ignore local and professional expertise as well as the needs of the region in developing the TJTPs represents a huge loss of public potential. Even though there is a historical attachment to the coal industry, the region has far more to recommend it. People are fiercely proud of their cultural and historical heritage, which they're keen to promote. The fertile lands of Stara Zagora are ripe for development, but other industries have been neglected at the expense of the coal mines.

At our meeting in Galabovo, one of the towns in Stara Zagora most affected by coal pollution, people were adamant that no government representatives had come to inform them of the territorial plans or ask their opinions.

There was confusion among the participants on the respective roles of non-governmental organisations and government, and a real desire to hold those responsible for the lack of transparency accountable.

Local citizens refuted the claims of politicians and trade unions that a majority want the mines and the notorious Brikel thermal power plant to continue operating. On the contrary, everyone we heard from expressed their opposition, particularly to the coal-fired Brikel plant, which has been marred by several controversies.

These include repeated pollution violations as well as instances of corruption and cover-ups by the plant's operators. Ever since the plant was established in 1962, toxic coal fumes have been **poisoning Galobovo's residents**, most of whom have spent their whole lives working in the mines. As such, any politician that visits Galabovo and promises to preserve jobs at Brikel coal plant is also complicit in polluting the air of the immediate and surrounding areas, where levels of sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide far exceed permissible standards.

Bulgaria's loss of EUR 98 million in EU funds at the end of 2022 – a direct result of the country's failure to submit its Territorial Just Transition Plans on time – has prompted no corrective action to date.

By failing to include the reforms needed to decarbonise the energy sector, the lack of any coherent renewable energy strategy beyond the upcoming elections has been clearly exposed. Green funding that could have unlocked the vast untapped potential of the renewable energy market in Bulgaria has been sacrificed for the sake of party interests that

preserve the status quo and promote unsustainable energy megaprojects.

It is the duty of Bulgaria's politicians (who, lest we forget, are employed to serve its citizens) to transparently present the opportunities that energy transition offers.

If the government is not prepared to draw up and submit well-designed TJTPs to the **European Commission**, Bulgarian citizens will miss out on EU funds critical to a just energy transition, and economic coercion will see the coal mines and power plants shut down without compensating those employed in the coal industry.

It is high time that those in power take responsibility for damaging the prospect of a low-carbon economy. Future renegotiation of **Bulgaria's National Recovery and Resilience Plan** must guarantee concrete measures and reforms.

Failure to do so risks delaying the implementation of Bulgaria's energy efficiency programme for multi-family residential buildings and its programme for individual renewable energy sources such as battery storage, which are designed to increase capacity, reduce the bills paid by households and businesses and limit dependence on foreign suppliers of fossil fuels.

If there is to be any hope of a smooth and just energy transition, Bulgaria's politicians must ditch the populist rhetoric and prioritise the involvement of civil society in the redrafting of the TJTPs. Otherwise, the futures of both mine workers and the residents of these polluted regions will remain bleak, Just Transition writes.