

Severe air pollution in the area surrounding the Bulgarian Maritsa East energy complex and its dramatic impacts on human health prompted two environmental organizations, Greenpeace Bulgaria and Za Zemiata, to start a public debate on the true costs of coal dependence of the country.

The campaign is aimed at phasing out old, polluting power plants of the complex and throughout the country, stopping expansion of neighboring lignite mines and creating alternatives for employment of people from affected regions. So far, it sparked off fierce controversy, faced censorship and exposed how denial can interfere with people's ability to care for and protect their well-being.

Bulgaria has the dirtiest air among all EU Member States. According to the European Environment Agency, four of Europe's five cities with the most consistently high levels of particulate matter - one of the most dangerous microscopic air pollutants - are in Bulgaria. It has also the highest rate of premature deaths due to air pollution in Europe. Particulate matter, ozone, nitrogen dioxide or sulphur dioxide enter deep into lungs and veins of Bulgarian citizens, causing respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. As a result, only in 2010, nearly 12,000 people in Bulgaria died prematurely from air pollution exposure. The number is even more noteworthy for this rather small nation, as it equals 1% of inhabitants of the country's capital Sofia.

Coal power generation, which produces nearly half of the country's electricity, adds to already poor air quality in Bulgaria. A large coal power plant can be called an "invisible killer", as it emits several thousand tons of hazardous air pollutants every year. The report published by Greenpeace Bulgaria revealed that in 2012, air pollution from coal power plants in Bulgaria led to 2,000 premature deaths. This is four times the death toll of road accidents the same year.

More than half of coal capacity is installed in four power plants which work on lignite obtained from the mines of Maritsa East. The biggest power plant, called Maritsa East 2 has over 1.5 GW installed capacity and is the largest thermal power plant on the Balkan Peninsula. According to health experts, it has an impact of over a thousand premature deaths annually and thus it has one of the highest imprint on health for Europe.

Health professionals regard the area around towns of Stara Zagora, Galabovo and Radnevo, where the complex is located, as a region of an increased health risk due to air pollution. 'In the last ten years we have seen a progressive increase, five- to tenfold, in diseases of the upper and lower respiratory tract: infections, allergic rhinitis, bronchial asthma, chronic respiratory deficiency, cough syndrome of unknown etiology,' said Dr Valchanova, an allergist from Stara Zagora. 'There has been an increase in skin diseases: dermatitis, eczema,

skin rashes of unknown etiology. More and more people come with oncological problems. Disease among children has increased too: virus infections, frequent respiratory diseases.' Yet, recognition of the fact that these health impacts are directly linked to burning coal proves to be far too controversial for people in the region. Even more so is a public debate on a gradual coal phase out as a mean to solve the problem.

'We believe that the only strategy which can guarantee clean air and health for the people in the region of Stara Zagora, and for Bulgaria as a whole, is a gradual phase out of the coal power plants in of Maritsa East energy complex,' according to Teodora Stoyanova from Greenpeace Bulgaria. 'However, it is very difficult to find people who will speak up against health damage incurred by the coal power plants. Local authorities, media and even most doctors want to sweep the problem under the carpet.'

Greenpeace Bulgaria and Za Zemiata (Friends of the Earth Bulgaria) believe that this is a result of the fact that, for generations people of the region have been dependent on coal as their only source of livelihoods. Therefore, as if coal dust was clouding their minds, they cannot imagine any alternative paths of regional development. Out of fear of changing the status quo, and thus putting their jobs at risks, they choose to ignore the impacts coal has on their health.

The conspiracy of silence surrounding the problem almost precluded publication of the report on impacts of coal on air pollution, released in November 2013 by Greenpeace. In the eleventh hour before the press conference, where the report was to be presented to the media, local authorities cancelled the reservation for the venue of the event. Moreover, hardly any local media reported on the findings of the report, so crucial to the well-being of the local population.

The activists believe that in order to break this wall of ignorance, they need to talk about economic development first. In 2014 the campaigners from Za Zemiata published a report presenting employment alternatives for people who work for coal power industry. A lot of its employees are highly qualified professionals, who would not have difficulty acquiring new skills or opening their own businesses. What they need most is convincement that they will be able to earn enough to support their families.

The two organizations engage also in an educational campaign aimed at school children and their parents. They organized a small tour in the towns around the region, with workshops focused on a very positive message of benefits of investing in energy efficiency and renewables. The audience had a lot of doubt whether this form of energy production is feasible, but also showed a lot of interest.

'This is the only ray of hope in the overwhelmingly negative picture from the region,' states

Genady Kondarev from Za Zemiata. 'Addiction to coal among local and national politicians is reinforced by their close ties with the industry representatives. They grant certain concessions when seeking their support for new laws or policies. They do not refrain from abusing human rights, if this allows them to boost expansion of the coal sector.'

In order to illustrate the level of corruption, Kondarev explains that one of the four plants in the region is owned by an oligarch Hristo Kovachki. The businessman has close ties with the government and his support for laws promoted in the parliament by the governing party is often sought after. At the same time, the plant he owns has already exhausted its quota of operational hours in 2010 and should have been closed. However, it continues to operate illegally and the government has recently expanded its license and pollution permit.

Za Zemiata also provides legal advice to the local communities who face expropriation. Due to the continuous expansion of the mines, more and more villages are being destroyed. Their inhabitants know they will have to leave, but lack information on the timeline and financial support which would allow them to start building their lives elsewhere. Therefore, they stay in the villages, waiting for a compensation offer to come and watching their houses turned into ruins by both tremors and lack of perspectives for the future. The compensation they receive is often below the market value of their properties, which comes as no surprise as they are being assessed by companies hired by the mine.

The activists find it difficult to believe that impacts of coal burning on public health of Bulgarian citizens will be granted proper public recognition and debate without pressure from more progressive Member States governments or the EU institutions. They raise the fact that some of these effects are limited to the region of Stara Zagora. Large portion of the fine particles, however, disperse over thousands of kilometres and their toll on health affect the entire country as well as its near and far neighbours, including many countries in the EU.

Campaigners from Greenpeace Bulgaria and Za Zemiata emphasize that, despite the difficulties, they will continue to provide support to local communities and actively oppose any political support the coal industry in Bulgaria receives. They believe that through consistence and determination they will be able to help the people from Stara Zagora region build future without coal. The slogan of their campaign is 'Look beyond the smoke.'

source: stories.coalmap.eu