

Bulgaria's abstention on the European Climate Law not only isolates the country within the EU once again but also reveals two familiar shortfalls in Bulgarian diplomacy

In late June, the Council of the European Union gave the green light to the first European Climate Law, following the adoption of the legislation by the European Parliament a few days earlier. The law is designed to reduce greenhouse emissions by 55 per cent (compared to 1990 levels) by 2030 and reach climate neutrality in the next 30 years. The EU is gradually turning into a climate champion, and this step converts its moral commitment into a legal obligation. The law provides European citizens and businesses with certainty and clarity about the path for the green transformation.

While MEPs from opposing sides of the political spectrum rejected some of the provisions of the law, 26 member states voted in favour of it at the Council of the EU. The only exception was Bulgaria. The country's caretaker government, which has been in place since mid-May, explained the abstention with a brief, vague comment: "the final compromise does not reflect sufficiently our national position". Subsequently, the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Water specified that the adopted text does not take into consideration several requests from the Bulgarian government, such as the inclusion of natural gas as transition fuel until 2030; recognition of the technology neutrality approach in the transition; or a proposal for a smoother reduction of coal subsidies, which currently sustain Bulgarian coal mining and processing.

The Bulgarian government has acted too late to oppose or affect the EU's legal framework for tackling climate change. The abstention runs counter to both the expectations of Bulgarian citizens and the union's long-running efforts to transform Europe into the first climate-neutral continent.

Since early 2021, the Sofia office of the European Council on Foreign Relations has conducted extensive research into the ways in which Bulgarian businesses and citizens view the EU's green recovery and climate policy efforts. According to a public opinion poll commissioned by ECFR, 80 per cent of Bulgarians support the 55 per cent emissions-reduction target and only 3 per cent oppose it. The survey shows that Bulgarians are strongly supportive of climate-oriented policies, but their concerns are not reflected in the programmes of the political parties. In Bulgaria, 85 per cent of respondents believe that global warming and its consequences are a problem of paramount importance, while just 3 per cent are climate change sceptics – 4 percentage points lower than the EU average. Despite their concerns, three-quarters of Bulgarians do not feel informed about or satisfied with the government's position on climate issues. These polling numbers are confirmed by recent Eurobarometer findings. The Eurobarometer study reveals that only 10 per cent of

Bulgarian respondents regard their national government's climate actions as sufficient, compared to the EU average of 20 per cent.

Generally, Bulgaria is among the least advanced EU countries in terms of the public debate and executive decisions within the framework of the European Green Deal. Climate change and the commitment to net zero still receive too little attention from Bulgarian politicians and scientists. Lately, the Bulgarian public debate on the European Green Deal has concentrated on the amount, timing, and allocation of EU funds Bulgaria will receive from the bloc's planned financing mechanisms. The main rationale for the new EU policy – achieving carbon neutrality and resource-saving or recycling – has been absent from the national discussion. Successive Bulgarian governments and leaders have been reluctant to commit to a clear path for the green transition within a set timeframe.

The political debate in the country does not reflect the urgency of the issue and, instead of producing forward-looking solutions, is mainly focused on populist slogans on issues such as the danger of high unemployment in the energy sector. This is particularly apparent in the region of Stara Zagora, where a coal mine and two thermal power plants are located. One cannot expect much support for the climate agenda from residents of this area, as political actors have prevented a reasoned debate on the potential closure of the plants.

Moreover, Bulgaria's abstention on the European Climate Law not only isolates the country within the EU once again but also reveals two familiar shortfalls in Bulgarian diplomacy. Firstly, the abstention on such an important and unprecedented law shows the Bulgarian civil service's lack of expertise and negotiation skill. It had years to negotiate a solution to Bulgaria's grievances, while equipping the economy for a low-carbon future. Secondly, the reaction to the abstention in the union resembles the response to the Bulgarian veto of the start of EU accession talks with North Macedonia in late 2020, which damaged Sofia's reputation and diminished its bargaining power within EU institutions. And, by resisting the EU's vital efforts to create a joint carbon-neutral future, Bulgaria has undermined European taxpayers' confidence that the country will efficiently allocate its share of the Just Transition and Recovery and Resilience facilities to climate mitigation and green investment. While the previous Bulgarian government was struggling to adjust to Europe's ambitions of climate leadership, the Commission launched the new legislative package 'Fit for 55'. Adopted on 14 July 2021, the package includes 13 new or revised pieces of legislation that will have a broad impact on all EU economies – if the Commission succeeds in addressing all the technical, social, and diplomatic challenges it presents, as ECFR's Alex Clark recently explained. The proposed extension of carbon pricing to the construction and transport sectors is likely to have a major impact on Bulgarian society, as is the carbon border-

adjustment mechanism's effect on the price of products imported from neighbouring Turkey and Serbia. This was not the case with the EU Emissions Trading System, whose effect on energy prices largely spared Bulgarian consumers (due to their country's coal subsidies and partially regulated energy markets). The Bulgarian government will now have to face up to the climate challenge, by the raising expectations of Bulgarian voters and catching up to climate policy developments in Brussels and further afield.

Source: ecfr.eu