

Controversial environmental super-law passed when debate and public consultation were curtailed by lockdown measures imposed as a result of the pandemic. The Greek government is now facing growing opposition over this law. Resistance has intensified as part of a grassroots revolt over legislation that critics contend will irrevocably change the face of Greece.

“It was passed in the most undemocratic way with very few MPs and when citizens were forced to stay at home and couldn’t react,” said Yorgos Tsamis, an activist educator on the frontline of a mass protest against the reform in Athens last week. “What is at stake is the future of the country, its mountains, valleys, coasts and animal species.”

Opponents argue the sweeping legislation allows wind parks to be installed on rocky isles, and protected areas of world-class biodiversity and beauty to be exploited by the oil and gas industry.

As the country increasingly adopts renewable energy, international companies are lining up to exploit its natural resources, including by placing industrial-sized turbines on windswept Aegean islands and mainland mountain ridges. For firms behind the proliferation of solar plants, Greece’s plentiful sun can be harnessed year round.

This is what worries Tsamis, who for the past month has protested outside the Greek parliament with a handwritten banner around his neck proclaiming: “environment is more important than economy”.

“They call it a modernising law that will promote green development,” he said referring to the centre-right administration of Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the prime minister. “For us, though, it is greed in modern form.”

It is a view shared by demonstrators, who, backed by the political opposition, have denounced the policies for favouring investors over an environment made ever more fragile by the challenges of climate change.

“Whichever way you slice it or dice it, this law has been drafted to facilitate large-scale investments and not the needs of local communities,” said Iosif Efraimidis, a prominent environmental activist. “Why should we destroy our natural and historic landscape, our hilltops and rocky isles, to produce energy that is then exported, at great cost, far and wide?”

The government, elected on a reform agenda last July, insists that after nearly a decade of debt crisis, the law will accelerate the country’s economic recovery post-coronavirus.

By overhauling environmental regulations blighted by bureaucracy and outdated rules, it argues business - and jobs - are likely to be boosted at a time when the nation again faces the spectre of deep recession. Environmental licensing, long a hurdle to investment, has

been simplified so permits that had required eight years to be granted can be obtained in 150 days. Land use rules have been changed and with them management of protected areas. “We have applied the best European practices,” said environment minister, Kostis Hatzidakis warning that Greece couldn’t afford to be “the country that investors think of as never to mess with, especially after coronavirus”.

Mitsotakis, an ardent advocate of renewables, said the legislation will enable Greece to end its addiction to coal while guaranteeing “rapid and sustainable development”. The government has vowed to phase out all but one of the country’s 14 lignite-powered stations by 2028 with a view to ensuring that more than a third of its energy production is clean by the end of the decade.

Last week Mitsotakis announced tax incentives to boost the use of electric vehicles as part of plans to move to low-carbon mobility in a state that remains far behind the rest of Europe in reducing carbon emissions. Opponents counter that the leader, whose career was in finance before he went into politics, is driven more by a desire to lure investors.

From Crete in the south to the Agrafa mountains in central Greece and Macedonia further north, critics fear the fast-tracked law is a fig leaf for “pharaonic infrastructure” projects. The legislation’s abstruse language – and the abrupt addition of provisions never publicly discussed – has fuelled concerns.

“One of the most problematic issues is that for the first time drilling for oil and gas is explicitly allowed within protected areas,” said Theodota Nantsou, head of environmental policy at WWF Greece. “As a result it seriously threatens those areas with housing and touristic development.”

Part of the global Natura 2000 network of protected areas, the sites are havens for rare species, both on land and at sea.

Over 80 ecological and civil society groups, with the backing of prominent NGOs, are now calling for the legislation to be nullified. Academics, judges and scientists have questioned the efficacy and legality of the law. A tourism bill introducing more lenient penalties for illegal coastal use, also passed last month, has further aggravated an increasingly active environmental lobby.

Condemnation has been particularly acute on islands where opposition to proposed wind farms has become ever more violent and where people are incensed they were never asked about projects that will directly affect their lives. Clashes erupted on Tinos in the Cyclades recently when riot police attempted to disperse locals demonstrating against turbines being erected in a region known for its natural beauty. Anger has mounted as diggers and bulldozers have moved in to create roads in areas designated for windfarms.

“It reminds me of the 1960s when we scarred our mountains just to export cement,” said Efraimidis, an architectural planner by profession. “The damage is still visible today.” MEPs have rallied. Petros Kokkalis, who represents the main opposition Syriza party in the European parliament, said greens and leftists are pressuring Frans Timmermans, the EU commissioner for climate action, to intervene and had written to him outlining the law’s flaws.

“Under guise of the pandemic, with severely limited public consultation, the government has rammed through a piece of legislation that mistakes deregulation for modernisation and goes against the wellbeing of Greek people,” he told the Guardian, emphasising that EU law, ultimately, superseded that of member states. “You can’t double the capacity of renewables in Greece with riot police. You have to build social alliances and ensure biodiversity protection to achieve a green deal. The government has chosen confrontation over cooperation.”

Source: [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com)