

Green parties in former communist countries hope to ride the coattails of their more successful counterparts in Western Europe — but they have their work cut out for them.

Greens are feeling blue in Central and Southeast Europe.

After watching their counterparts in Western Europe score record wins in European Parliament elections in May, nascent Green parties in the region aspire to make a bigger splash in local and international politics.

But while Greens in countries such as Germany, France and Britain have a 40-year head start in learning from mistakes and engaging with the public, environmentalists in former communist nations find the odds stacked against them.

Analysts say the EU's younger member states have failed to catch Europe's so-called Green wave because voters there care more about bread-and-butter concerns like jobs, healthcare and social security than global issues such as climate change.

Meanwhile, embryonic Green parties in Western Balkan countries keen to join the EU are struggling to drag the movement from the world of grassroots activism into mainstream politics.

"Greens are fragmented and often still associated with protests," said Garret Patrick Kelly, head of SEE Change Net, a Sarajevo-based network of environmental groups in Southeast Europe.

Michal Berg, a member of the Czech Green Party who oversees Southeast Europe for the European Greens, an alliance of national Green parties, said the movement is working on a country-by-country analysis to help it expand into new territory.

"This is one of our top priorities in the coming period," he said. "We've already started drafting a strategy how to develop green politics in the region."

While Greens notched 74 seats across the EU in May — 20 more than in the previous election — only Czech Republic, Latvia and Lithuania contributed to the tally from Central or Eastern Europe, and with only six seats between them.

Along the EU's southeastern flank, the Green vote hardly registers. And in EU hopefuls in the Western Balkans, where recognisable Green parties are few and far between, the situation is even worse.

Berg said the European Greens will now focus on "clusters" of countries to reflect the current status of Green parties as well as differences in how voters in various countries perceive Green politics.

From toxic to trendy

One cluster is the Visegrad Group of Central European states: Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland.

Poland has led Visegrad opposition to the EU's more progressive climate policies. In June, it helped block an EU target of zero carbon emissions by 2050, citing the high cost of transitioning to alternative energy from fossil fuels.

Coal accounts for around 80 per cent of Poland's energy needs, making it a hard habit to break even as solar and wind power become more cost-effective.

But analysts say the country's obstruction is really about leaders in Warsaw trying to extract as much cash from the EU before eventually agreeing to the goal.

Environmental politics have long been muted in Poland, but that changed with campaigning for European Parliament elections.

The Polish Green Party joined the European Coalition, the main opposition force challenging the governing Law and Justice (PiS) party, with Green candidates running on the coalition's list.

And significantly, the newly formed centre-left Wiosna (Spring) party broke a long-standing taboo in Polish politics by campaigning to phase out coal by 2035. Three politicians from Wiosna, including leader Robert Biedron, won European Parliament seats.

As Poland heads into a general election next month, all major political forces apart from PiS have proposed dates for phasing out coal.

"Most parties are suddenly becoming very ecological," said Ewa Sufin-Jacquemart, a Green Party member who ran unsuccessfully in May on the European Coalition list.

Thousands of people in Poland and other Visegrad countries — and across the Balkans too — took part in a worldwide strike on Friday to urge global leaders to take swift action to halt the climate crisis.

In Czech Republic voters sent three MEPs to the Greens/European Free Alliance political group in the European Parliament in May, though all were from the anti-establishment Czech Pirate Party.

Green issues played a role in toppling communism in former Czechoslovakia in 1989 but lost importance over the next 30 years as air quality improved, analysts say.

"People had felt really endangered by the toxicity of the environment," said Bedrich Moldan, who served as the first Czech environment minister in the early 1990s and is now deputy director at Charles University's Environment Centre in Prague.

"Now people have become complacent ... They think that things are basically OK and are

more interested in catching up with the salaries [in Western Europe].”

Yet Czech Republic, a manufacturing economy with one of the highest energy inefficiencies in the EU, still has plenty of environmental problems and is near the top of the charts in greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution.

The country’s Green party has had little influence since it split after serving for a term in the government of 2006-2010. But environmental groups are quietly becoming more assertive, focusing on education and shaping policy.

In neighbouring Slovakia, Green politics are making a comeback after decades in the doldrums.

In March, Slovaks elected progressive newcomer Zuzana Caputova as president after she ran on a platform that included environmental issues.

Caputova won the 2016 Goldman Environmental Prize — known as the “green Nobel prize” — for saving a Slovak town from a dangerous waste dump.

And in May, Slovaks elected two environmental activists to the European Parliament, though not under the Green banner.

“It’s evident that environmental issues resonate with society and political parties are forced to address them,” said Radek Kubala, a campaign coordinator for Greenpeace Slovakia.

In Hungary, the LMP (Politics Can Be Different) party was founded in 2009 with a view to capitalising on green politics.

LMP won seven per cent of votes in the last general election in 2018 but saw its support slump to 2.5 per cent in the European Parliament poll, mostly due to internal power struggles.

Meanwhile, analysts say the ruling Fidesz party is juggling a desire to lure foreign investors who might see environmental policies as a barrier to growth with an awareness that younger voters increasingly care about addressing climate change.

Some Fidesz ideologists try to frame green policies as a kind of pseudo-communist ploy to win back voters.

Antal Rogan, the minister for Orban’s cabinet office who oversees government communications, said in a TV interview that “green politics is like a watermelon: green outside but red inside”.

Choked by other issues

According to Berg of the European Greens, Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovenia are a “cluster” of countries where “something is happening” but where Greens “need major reforms”.

As in the former Czechoslovakia, the environmental movement in Bulgaria helped fuel protests that brought democracy in 1989.

In subsequent years, dozens of parties sprang up with “green” or “eco” in their names, but none proved resilient and some had little to do with environmental issues.

That changed somewhat after activists established the Greens party in 2008, making their mark through civic campaigns.

Renamed the Green Movement, the party has been a member of the European Green Party since 2013 and is part of the reformist Democratic Bulgaria coalition.

In Croatia, Vedran Horvat, executive director of the Institute for Political Ecology in Zagreb, said environmental parties in the EU’s youngest member state hope to catch the public’s attention after years of small successes at the city level.

“In our political space, for a long time, the environment, climate, energy and agricultural policy have not been a priority,” he said.

Meanwhile, Berg described the Green movement in Romania as “very weak” and requiring an overhaul.

Remus Cernea, a former Green party president who sat in Romania’s parliament between 2012 and 2016, agreed.

“At a political level, there is no relevant ecological force today,” he said. “We don’t have any party preoccupied with reducing greenhouse gas emissions [or that] opposes the use of fossil fuels.”

Among Western Balkan countries aspiring to EU membership, environmental issues simply cannot compete with other voter concerns and parties only dabble with Green policies, analysts say.

The exception is North Macedonia, where the liberal Democratic Renewal of Macedonia party has been a staunch advocate of green policies for years. Since 2008, it has been a minor player in the ruling coalition.

“In North Macedonia, it works somehow, so we’re looking at what was successful and how we can transfer it to other countries,” Berg said.

In other EU hopefuls, Green parties either do not exist or find it pays to focus more on non-Green issues.

Serbia has four Green parties — all weak and some barely recognisable as Greens, experts say.

The most prominent, Greens Serbia, supports the ruling Serbian Progressive Party despite widespread criticism that the government only pays lip service to Green values.

Things are just as bleak for Greens in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where environmentalists

have long failed to make inroads despite the notoriety of several Bosnian cities — including the capital, Sarajevo — as among the world's most polluted.

"If you live in Sarajevo, it's approximately equivalent to having smoked a pack of cigarettes a day for 22 years," said Kelly from SEE Change Net.

Bosnia used to have two minor Green parties but one has shut up shop.

"Voters in Bosnia are just not used to thinking about all aspects of politics that might exist," said Zlatiborka Popov Momcinovic, a political analyst in Sarajevo. "And with all the tensions we have, parties that aren't focused on nationalism have no chance."

Across the Balkans, non-governmental organisations rather than political parties are the loudest champions of the Green cause, experts say.

"In those countries, we need to rely on civic society since we have no real partners on the political scene," Berg said. "It's not that there is no Green or progressive electorate there, but they are being captured by parties with slightly different priorities."

Pollution politics

Analysts say many former communist countries still wrestle with governance issues that trump environmental concerns.

For that reason, the European Greens say they have been broadening their platform to include anti-corruption, transparency and human rights along with issues like sustainable development, biodiversity and climate change.

In Montenegro, the country's first-ever Green party, the Civic Movement Ura (Hooray), soon hopes to join the European Greens. In the meantime, it lists corruption and transparency as priorities.

EU politics also play a role in shaping Green fortunes.

Ursula von der Leyen, the new President of the European Commission, has said she aims to deliver a European Green Deal to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050.

In member states in Central and Southeast Europe, the EU supports projects to improve eco-friendliness in areas ranging from business and infrastructure to heating, insulation and house construction.

But such projects are few in the Balkans and many smell a whiff of hypocrisy in EU demands to put the planet before economic growth and living standards.

"You're coming here to ask us to do something that you don't signal with your own funding or your own policy framework," Kelly said of EU institutions.

The EU has recently tried to discourage Balkan countries from taking Chinese loans to build

new thermal power plants and other non-green energy projects while failing to offer funds for alternatives, analysts say.

And while such Chinese-funded projects are far from green, they are more eco-friendly than the decades-old systems they replace — a detail often ignored by EU officials, they add. For example, the EU has criticised the construction of a new block in the Tuzla thermal power plant in Bosnia, questioning the choice of energy technology and saying a state guarantee for a Chinese loan could constitute illegal state aid. But experts say it will at least put two dirty old blocks out of commission.

According to Kelly, the first shoots of green awareness tend to spring from local politics where environmental projects are seen to have an impact.

“In the Balkans, basically the market is doing the work and the politicians are slow on the uptake, except for (some) mayors,” he said. “Mayors have more liberty to launch such projects, plus their focus is more on the local communities than higher party leaders.”

He added: “There is enormous opportunity to be cleaner and greener, in terms of jobs, in terms of new technologies, in terms of keeping young people in the region, but they [politicians] haven’t made that leap yet.”

Source: balkaninsight.com