

Much of the anxiety around backlash against EU climate policies has focused on Eastern Europe

On 9 June, shortly before the European Commission unveiled its Fit for 55 proposal to meet the EU's new 55% greenhouse gas emissions reduction target for 2030, demonstrators filled the streets of Warsaw, Poland. Some chanted slogans against the EU Green Deal- the policy framework guiding the bloc's climate policy. At the same time, posters appeared around the EU quarter in Brussels, asking if the new policy was a green deal or a "grim deal". The poster campaign cited a website with .pl domain ending.

The Polish government has been the biggest obstacle to EU climate action over the past decade, consistently trying to veto stricter emissions reduction targets or limits on industrial pollution. Warsaw believes it, as the largest country of Central and Eastern Europe, speaks for a whole region in terms of the worry about the economic effects of measures to fight climate change.

Public opinion surveys suggest this belief may not be unfounded. People in Eastern Europe are, on average, less concerned about climate change than those in Western and Southern Europe, finds the 2020 edition of the World Risk Report. While 73% of people in Southern Europe believe climate change is a "very serious" threat, only 47% feel the same way in Eastern Europe. This difference in public opinion has given rise to much hand-wringing about whether EU climate policies could spark a backlash and is the reason why the EU Just Transition Fund, designed to cushion the blow, is geared towards the East.

But on closer inspection, concerns in Central and Eastern Europe are more nuanced. Those posters in Brussels lambasting the Green Deal were paid for by a Polish coal mine slated to be closed down by order of the European Court of Justice. The protest in Warsaw was also rooted in the coal mine's closure, with workers bussed in from Poland's coal regions to participate. Rather than being a blowback against the Green Deal, opposition to climate measures seems largely angry at the loss of coal mining jobs.

However, there is a real risk that as EU climate policy becomes more ambitious and impacts everyday activities like refuelling cars or heating homes, the backlash will grow. "There are some people, not just in Poland but also elsewhere, who are trying to mobilise against the broader climate agenda and seeking to exploit legitimate concerns about jobs and restructuring to push a broader anti-climate agenda", worries Judith Kirton-Darling, a former member of the European Parliament and now deputy general secretary of industriAll Europe, an umbrella organisation representing manufacturing, mining and energy workers. "The potential impact of badly managed or hasty structural change would be quite considerable," she adds. "Lots of our focus is on Central and Eastern Europe because it's a combined phase-out of coal, transformation of heavy industry and changing the automotive industry all at the same time".

The argument heard in Eastern Europe is that because these economies are not yet as developed as those in Western Europe, they should not be asked to make the same sacrifices to solve the climate crisis. The fact these regions already experienced a disruptive transition in the 1990s - that left some people out in the cold - offers extra reason for scepticism as to whether any change can be “just”, say Eastern politicians. Compounding these concerns is a sense that policy is being imposed from a more developed West that can more easily afford the changes.

“One problem is the ‘not invented here’ syndrome,” says Julian Popov, a fellow at the European Climate Foundation and former Minister of Environment of Bulgaria. “Central and Eastern European countries don’t feel they have been involved in the development of the climate agenda and they resist it instinctively”.

He says the other problem is that climate action has been presented as a sacrifice or burden. “We even use this term officially - burden sharing. The much more relevant view that climate action is also a technological and economic opportunity has not yet fully arrived in the region”.

Changing tides

However, there are signs of change, mainly due to money. Following heavy pressure from the Polish government and others, the Commission announced last year it would accompany Green Deal measures with an EU Just Transition Fund, designed to help regions dependent on the ‘old’ economy, such as coal regions, transition to other forms of employment. That idea was translated into a €17.5bn fund within the €1.7trn EU multi-annual budget for 2021-2027. The Commission says the fund will mobilise up to €30bn in investment when matched with private funding.

But trade unions are not hugely impressed. They say €17.5bn over seven years is a drop in the ocean. The concrete proposals needed to ensure a just transition is more than just rhetoric are still lacking, says Kirton-Darling.

This is where the Warsaw protest comes in. Some climate campaigners believe such events can bring about positive change. “We have these protests in Poland all the time”, says Miłoslawa Stępień, just transition coordinator with the NGO Bankwatch. “From the perspective of Polish activists, it’s a form of pressuring the government”.

The strongest trade unions in Poland are in Upper Silesia, a coal region, she explains. “They are negotiating the terms of the coal phase-out in the region. If they’re not happy, they tend to bring their members out to protest.” Sometimes, she says, their proposals can be “extremely constructive and more progressive than we’re getting from the government”. At

other times, they “push for things that are a hindrance”, she admits.

While the Polish government would doubtless prefer the protesters focus their ire on Brussels, Kirton-Darling says by all accounts they are very much focused on Warsaw. The June protests “didn’t seem as anti-EU as we’d feared”, she says. Instead, they were “very critical of the way the closing of [the] Turow [coal mine] has been dealt with, very critical of how the Polish government managed the situation”.

Pressure from coal workers has for years pushed the Polish government (or perhaps, given them a justification) to fight against climate action at EU level. But Stępień says this is no longer the case. “Even during the COP [UN climate summit] in Katowice two years ago, you had high-level Polish officials denying climate change, saying there was no need to move away from coal. Now the situation has changed. The focus is more on how and when it will be done, and how we minimise the losses from that transition”.

The unions representing coal workers, says Stępień, are now more focused on how to implement the transition than stop it, and the appearance of the EU Just Transition Fund has been instrumental in this change of heart. “The money has had a huge influence,” Stępień believes. In many regions where just a few years ago they talked about continuing with coal mining for the next 20-30 years, there was a shift within a few months, he says. “Now they say, we can apply for EU funds that will help us transition away from coal and find a new future”.

Workers: power imbalance

However, not all unions in Central and Eastern Europe are as powerful as those in Upper Silesia. In fact, they are more the exception than the rule. “The problem in Poland is that most trade unions are not real trade unions”, says Stępień. “You have trade unions that are organised by the companies themselves, run by puppet directors or chairs”.

Kirton-Darling says there is an imbalance, more generally, in the power of the unions across Europe. Where unions are weak, it has often been more difficult to get people on board the energy transition“. Industrial relations have been intentionally weakened by governments in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in Romania and Slovakia”, says Kirton-Darling.

Romania recently dismantled sector-wide collective bargaining, and in Slovakia trade unions have complained the government is chipping away at their ability to negotiate, with collective bargaining pushed back down to company level. “If you’re organising a just transition, it’s difficult if you can’t negotiate above the level of a workplace”, she adds.

“That’s in stark contrast to the positive story we see in places like Sweden or Finland, where they have a radical climate agenda and trade unions have signed up to [it] because they’ve

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been involved in the discussions,” continues Kirton-Darling. “If you have strong industrial relations, you can have rapid emissions reductions.”

Ensuring that renewable energy workers are unionised will also be important. In California, unions play a key role in driving forward the clean energy job market and ensuring a diversity of people are employed in such jobs. In general, in the EU, unionisation the renewables sector has been slow going so far.

“The wind industry in many European countries is still quite a young industry – it takes time for trade unions to bring it into their membership portfolio”, says Christoph Zipf from trade association WindEurope. But there are several examples of unions actively supporting the transition to renewables. Zipf cites “fruitful collaboration” between the German union IG Metall Küste and the German wind energy associations.

Better collaboration could make a difference in Eastern Europe – the greater degree of scepticism about climate action is more structural than an immutable opinion. “It’s not that people in Central and Eastern Europe are not worried about the climate, it’s about relative priorities”, says Kirton-Darling. “If you have an economy that’s based on low pay, and a lot of people are making the money stretch to the end of the month, then where are people’s priorities?” With this in mind, there is the risk of a perfect storm in the region, she believes. “The yellow vest risk in Romania is probably far higher than in Western Europe because people are already experiencing high levels of energy poverty even before EU climate laws kick in”.

Popov points out that unions in Central and Eastern Europe, which are more developed in some countries than in others, are “prepared to join the transition if a credible offer is available”. “Attitudes are changing but political leadership is missing. The paradox is that political leaders are far behind public attitudes”.

The nuances of the situation in Eastern Europe have been lost on some in Brussels and other Western European capitals, who characterise climate policy as a black and white battle of good versus evil. While the positions of the Polish government are often at odds with the longer-term economic interests of the country, many of its concerns are legitimate. The key will be engaging with the people on the ground, particularly through union representatives. If policymakers don’t take such steps, the EU’s energy transition risks stumbling.

Source: Energy Monitor