

Peaceful protests occurred in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Ruse, Pazardjik, Blagoevgrad, Botevgrad, as well as on the Kara Dere beach. The rally in Sofia expectedly drew the biggest crowd, as thousands took to the streets of the capital, ending their march in front of parliament.

Protests in several Bulgarian towns condemned amendments to the Biodiversity Act, which they say will potentially harm protected zones, delay protective measures and introduce commercial construction work to those areas. As concern grows over rampant construction all over the country, protesters say amendments to important act will deal another big blow to the country's suffering environment.

"These were the most massive protests Bulgaria has seen since the start of the coronavirus crisis," For Nature, an NGO, and one of the organisers of the demonstrations, wrote on Facebook on Friday. "We strongly urge the authorities to immediately stop the amendments to the Biodiversity Act," it added.

The amendments to the act were recently approved on a first reading. They were introduced by the nationalist Vice-Prime Minister, Valery Simeonov and former Ecology Minister Neno Dimov before his resignation and arrest, with the blessing of the Minister of Environment, Emil Dimitrov. If the amendments pass, development a strategy of preventive measures for endangered areas and for threatened animals, plants and habitats will be put on hold for four years. The participation of scientists or professionals working in nature parks in this process will also no longer be required.

"You're killing us with concrete," one of the protest signs at a rally said.

Protesters, mostly in their twenties, thirties and forties, were advised to keep a distance and wear masks, and, although some followed the advice, crowding was inevitable.

"It's a peculiar time for a protest, isn't it?" noted one woman observing the passing protesters from a nearby park. Others joined in, on the go. "I just found out about this an hour ago," said a man as the crowding became tighter in front of parliament. The protest was largely symbolic, as it took place after working hours had ended, and no government politicians were in sight.

The protest is a continuation of the several others held earlier in June, which opposed over-construction on the seaside, as photos of new construction work in the Sinemoretz and Alepu beach and camping locations in southern Bulgaria went viral.

The municipality of Burgas alerted the courts about plans to turn the Alepu beach from a wild beach into a resort. Minister Dimitrov said he could not stop everything. "I know people expect me to be some kind of a bat in the hands of the eco-activists, and stop every construction that people don't like," he commented on June 16.

The current rallies are in line with several ecological-related protests in the last ten years, most notably held against the changes made to Pirin mountain's management plan and its potential commercialization in 2018, and against similar plans for Sofia's Vitosha mountain between 2009 and 2012.

The country has been plagued with ecological concerns this year. In early 2020, several dams, most notably near the town of Pernik, dried up. The Minister of Environment and Water, Neno Dimov, had to resign and was charged with deliberate mismanagement of a water crisis. This week, the citizens of Pernik got back a proper full-time water supply for the first time in seven months. Minister Dimitrov, of the United Patriots party, is often criticised by activists and others for his lack expertise on ecology and the environment. On June 19, his Vice-Minister, Slaveya Stoyanova, was removed for unclear reasons by Prime Minister Boyko Borissov after less than a month in the position.

Source: balkaninsight.com