

As of 2020, North Macedonian government adopted the Energy Development Strategy, which proposes three coal phase-out scenarios; a business-as-usual scenario with a total coal phase-out by 2040, and two scenarios aiming at 2025. To get there, the government ambitiously seeks to boost its RES power generation capacities to 50 percent by 2024. But the government's announcement to overhaul the Bitola power plant at a press conference on 10 February potentially undermines its ambitious plans to drive forward the energy transition under the green scenario, according to Elena Nikolovska, the communication coordinator at non-governmental group Eko-svest. Meanwhile, the Bitola coal power plant emitted the highest levels of sulphur dioxide in the region in 2019, causing severe public health consequences that reach well beyond North Macedonia.

Nikolovska said that apart from stranding financial assets, these statements distract from the need to include stakeholder positions and the demands of affected communities in Bitola and Kičevo in the process of planning a transition away from coal.

Where are the local voices?

Mirroring the other Western Balkan countries, the energy transition has been ushered in by the national government with priority given to the development of renewable energy. Yet, much more needs to be done in terms of designing the process and opening it up for participation.

So far, the government is working without a clear definition of just transition in its draft National Energy and Climate Plan. It has also not included any plans to transition from coal-dependency into alternative economic development in Bitola and Kičevo in its Energy Development Strategy.

Additionally, by trying to steer the energy transition entirely from the central level, the government risks the legitimacy and efficiency of this process.

There have not been any efforts made to include local communities and workers in national-level debates on social relief, investments, and the restructuring of the mining sector in the regions, according to Nikolovksa.

"The involvement of affected communities and workers, however, is a prerequisite to a just energy transition," stated Nikolovska, "and their needs should guide regional redevelopment policies."

Meanwhile, the setting up of working groups that focus on designing assistance schemes with all relevant stakeholders has become a matter of urgency since the government has to select projects to be funded within the Platform initiative in Support of Coal Regions in Transition in Western Balkans and Ukraine.

From the bottom up

Eko-svest is now trying to fill in the gaps. The NGO has been advocating for a bottom-up approach to just transition in the coal-reliant regions since last year

Based on interviews with key stakeholders and citizens from Kičevo, it conducted an alternative economic development analysis and a feasibility study of rooftop solar photovoltaic systems. In September 2020, it organized a roundtable with local citizens, representatives of public forest enterprises and business owners to discuss the findings of its analysis and develop recommendations for alternative economic development in the region

To link the bottom-up approach in Kičevo and the ongoing central-level policy processes, Eko-svest is organizing a series of workshops and a round table discussion with representatives of affected residents and the coal trade unions, members of the local municipal authorities, and the private sector from 29 March until 7 April. There will also be representatives of the energy sector from the Ministry of Economy as well as of the Ministry of Environment, the cabinet of the Vice Prime Minister and academia.

"It is high time to ground the just transition process at the local level," stated Nikolovska. Being the first of its kind, the panel discussion on 7 April intends to set in motion further dialogues that gather all affected stakeholders and community representatives to design a fair and just energy transition plan.

Eko-svest aims to clarify the just transition concept for North Macedonia in a collaborative way, during the upcoming workshops with stakeholders, residents of the affected communities and Alexandru Mustață, just transition coordinator at CEE Bankwatch Network. On 7 April, Mustață will be presenting a position paper on how to define a just transition so it doesn't remain an abstract concept in national strategies. Instead, the paper will focus on the concrete work of trade unions, international institutions and NGOs, collecting examples from across Europe.

Equipped with the concept and input from locals, Eko-svest intends to advocate for a just transition at the central level through its participation in the drafting of the Climate Action Law and strategy, and the Programme for the Implementation of the Energy Strategy guideline. It also advocates for the central government to systematically include the inputs of locals into planning. The national strategic documents and the law are set to be completed by June 2021.

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