

In August 2017, hundreds of residents from the coastal areas of north-east Bulgaria blocked the main international road leading from Romania's largest Black Sea city of Constanța to Bulgaria's Varna in protest against a government decision forbidding them to use their lands for construction, tourism and agriculture. The sense of discontent is still there today. For locals, agriculture and tourism are the main sources of income, and the actions by the authorities in Sofia are perceived as a constant threat. For a long time, they could not figure out how they could use their land, which falls within NATURA zones.

Kaliakra is probably the most beautiful Black Sea cape of Bulgaria. But it has also become an illustration of the hectic way in which the government tries to balance the interests of big business, local communities and environmentalists.

"My concern is that people who do not even know where the village of Balgarevo and the Bolata area are located make decisions for us," said Vladimir Rachev, who runs a small business with tourist bungalows in Balgarevo.

Balgarevo is located at the heart of one of the largest NATURA areas on the Bulgarian Northern Black Sea coast. NATURA 2000 is a network of nature protection areas in the territory of the EU.

Nearby is the beautiful area of Bolata, with the only beach in the area, surrounded by the high red rocks on Cape Kaliakra, where cars are not allowed and there is no public transport. At the same time, the largest wind farm in the country was built in the protected area near their village, and there are also golf courses with hotels nearby.

Many rare and migratory birds can be seen in Kaliakra in spring and autumn, and it is also home to a number of rare breeding birds, like pied wheatear [*Oenanthe pleschanka*] and a local race of European shag [*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*]. The reserve also hosts rare breeding birds such as the saker falcon, lesser grey shrike and many of others. Even so, biodiversity is clearly under threat.

"I grew up here and I have witnessed the disappearance of fish species from the Black Sea in the space of 20-30 years, which is shocking. There is overfishing, regulations are not followed," said Krasimir Metev from Balgarevo, who now develops his own sustainable tourism business.

"Via Pontica, the path of the birds, passes through Kaliakra. As a child, I remember the autumn flocks of birds that blackened the sky. They are gone now. The most common thing for our ears was the sound of quails, which have also disappeared," he told EURACTIV.

Bulgaria is among the countries with the highest percentage of NATURA 2000 protected areas, which must preserve valuable natural habitats for future generations but in reality, these areas have no protection from the state because no legal acts and decrees have been

issued determining what can and cannot be done with them

The problem is huge

Bulgaria's Natura protected areas cover 34.8% of its territory, and the country ranks third in the EU in terms of the share of protected areas, after Slovenia and Croatia. The surface of Natura sites in Bulgaria is almost twice the EU average of 18%, according to Eurostat.

Bulgaria's environmental performance in general leaves a lot to be desired. For example, bee-killing pesticides which are banned in the EU are still used in the country.

Critical voices from civil society associations are growing stronger, arguing that the NATURA design model in Bulgaria was wrong in the first place. The zones are defined without a solid scientific basis and the voice of the local communities, whose economic initiatives are blocked, is not heard.

As a result, the European Commission has opened infringement proceedings and the European Court of Justice has ruled against Bulgaria concerning the designation and protection of Kaliakra.

Chaos

In early 2019, the Commission ordered Bulgaria, Italy and Germany to complete the construction of their NATURA network, which means issuing orders that outline permitted and prohibited activities in each individual protected area.

The Commission threatened the three member states with infringement proceedings and its announcement revealed that Bulgaria had designated only nine out of 230 Sites of Community importance as Special Areas of Conservation. However, the environment ministry has not taken any action.

The then environment minister Neno Dimov, who was arrested in early 2020 after a EURACTIV investigation into the water crisis in Pernik, tried to push through controversial changes to the Biodiversity Act.

The reforms sought to abolish restrictive orders for NATURA areas, and leave governance at the "discretion of the minister", instead of laying down clear rules.

Dimov's proposal led to a serious new conflict between environmental activists, the state and associations of landowners in NATURA areas. Environmentalists have argued that the minister's "discretionary" model invites corruption.

The ministry retorted that strict administrative restrictions with orders would distance communities from the very idea of NATURA.

"The principle is that the best caretaker of a territory is the owner, because it is his,"

explained Miroslav Kalugerov, director of the National Service for Nature Protection at the Ministry of Environment.

Minister Dimov also hinted at removing areas from the NATURA programme if it is proved that there are no animals and plants in need of protection there. He was arrested shortly afterwards.

New momentum

A new momentum with NATURA has been observed under the new minister Emil Dimitrov, who issued 25 orders this June. A public hearing is under way to declare fifty new protected areas for protection of natural habitats and of wild flora and fauna, in a desperate attempt to avoid a new case against Bulgaria before the European Court of Justice.

“It cannot be denied that since Dimov did not issue a single NATURA order, despite the direct alert of the European Commission, the new minister is moving forward on the issue,” environmentalist Stefan Avramov told EURACTIV Bulgaria.

Environmentalists hope the time lost in the case will not provoke new sanctions against Bulgaria. All the while, representatives of local associations and investors have insisted on public debates, where they can clearly state their vision for economic activity and seek a compromise between environmental protection and investment.

The associations of landowners belonging to NATURA have repeatedly noted that the eco-network in Bulgaria is confused. The National Association ‘Bulgarian Black Sea Coast’ points out that when the zones were determined there was a lack of good scientific expertise to identify the exact habitats of valuable species and nesting birds.

Furthermore, the opportunity to attract international expertise and apply best practices in the EU has not been used.

The Kaliakra slap

The loudest criticism from the European Commission came in relation to the Kaliakra zone, where wind farms and golf courses were built along the birds’ migratory paths.

In January 2016, the European Court of Justice condemned Bulgaria for this problem. The decision identified a number of projects built in violation of the zone, which was the fault of the state, for failing to correctly define the scope of the zone.

In response, the Ministry of Environment and Water decided to use European funds under the Environment Program to buy land in the Kaliakra area from private owners and protect the area. The set budget is €10 million, from which 760 hectares of land will be bought at market prices.

The most beautiful cape in Bulgaria became a showcase of environmental illiteracy

Part of this money must be used to cover the fees for the construction rights on some of these plots, which have already been paid and issued to their owners. With only three months left until the end of the year, there is still no end in sight.

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