

Once a fertile region known for its healthy air, stunning scenery and high quality saffron, Western Macedonia has been destroyed for huge lignite mining operations. Local and national campaigners are struggling to switch the mindset of the Greeks from brown to green energy. Greece may build yet another power plant in the area – supported with German money.

Kozani, the middle of June. Ignoring the sweltering heat outside, a small van full of Greenpeace staff and volunteers makes its way on industrial roads, trying to get close to the several coal power plants and lignite mines that are dotted north of the city. The sounds of chanting birds and wind rustling through the wheat stalks are interrupted regularly by thundering trucks full of coal, or the faraway rumbling of conveyor belts.

And then we see the first pit. Stretching for miles from left to right, a huge hole scars the valley. The edges are formed by steep terraces that could serve well for planting rice. But they are just a tool to dig up enormous amounts of lignite coal, transport it to the coal power station at the far right of the pit, where four chimneys and four water cooler towers stick their noses into the air. As the operation progresses, the pit becomes deeper and deeper. Western Macedonia has around 2.3 billion tonnes of lignite in the ground. Check this series of stunning pictures on Mashable on the ‘dirty, dangerous job that powers Greece’.

Greece is highly dependent on lignite for its electricity production. It has 16 operating lignite units that can generate almost 5 gigawatts, accounting for half of the national electricity production. Many of the plants are old, as the lignite business already started in the 1950s, and exceed the EU’s emission standards. But several new ones may be built – the most controversial of them ‘Ptolemaida V’. ‘Even the construction of just this plant would be a horrible scenario,’ claims Takis Grigoriou, climate and energy campaigner for Greenpeace Greece. ‘That would basically mean the extension of lignite use for another half century.’ Greenpeace has been campaigning against lignite for many years. The NGO does this by showing the real cost of coal to the environment, the public health, and to the economy. But Grigoriou and his colleagues also show what could be possible. ‘At the same time we are trying to show that solutions are here, and are ready to be deployed. What we want to do is get the PPC to start phasing out coal and invest in clean energy and energy efficiency.’

A European Grand Canyon

On the other side of the road between Kozani and Ptolemaida, several other coal power plants emerge and behind them and there is an even bigger pit. The lignite fields of Ptolemaida resemble a European version of the Grand Canyon, where in its depths, dozens of trucks can be spotted that continue to bring the coal to the ever-hungry power stations in the vicinity. ‘At the end of the fields you can see Mavropigi’, Grigoriou says. ‘The field

extends right up to the front of the village.'

Mavropigi is half deserted, houses are cracking and seem to be standing at some kind of cliff. The state-owned Public Power Corporation (PPC) has the right to dig up to a hundred meters from any village, without need for compensating the people living there. But according to Grigoriou, the villagers are now in a 'quite lengthy battle' in order to get relocated and compensated. So far five villages have been relocated, Mavropigi may get the same 'treatment' from PPC.

In a hotel bar, we meet with the former president of Mavropigi. Tassos Emmanouil says that by now, most of the residents have left their houses. But as many of them struggle to find a new job or livelihood, 'some residents decide to continue staying at the village.' According to Emmanouil, the compensation that the PPC offers is lower than the real value of the houses that were left behind. 'On top of that some residents were suddenly forced to leave the village without being explained why and whose responsibility it was.'

Once famous for clean air

Just 20 kilometers from the mining areas lies the city of Kozani. Its municipality has around 70,000 people, 300,000 people live in the broader area of Western Macedonia. Though many inhabitants are dependent on jobs in the coal industry, those not working in the fields feel the impact too.

'The impact on the health of the residents is very serious,' claims Lefteris Ioannidis, mayor of Kozani (and member of the Green party). 'Air pollution is very high, and we see many people around whose health is deteriorating.' The area of Kozani has a high number of cancer cases and cardiovascular diseases - very possibly caused by emissions from the mining and burning of coal.

Ioannidis recalls that back in the 1950s, Western Macedonia was renowned for its clean air and people with respiratory problems would come here to get better. 'But now exactly the opposite is happening. We are faced with more and more air pollution, and there is not a plan of dealing with them.' The mayor is pleading for a 'substitution' of lignite activities by 'more ecological' energy solutions. 'The methods of energy production need to change immediately.'

This would also be good for the region in general. 'We can upgrade the area by providing new green jobs, restoring the [destroyed nature of the] lignite mines and make most of the comparative advantages of our region.' In order to get there, Lefteris Ioannidis is calling for an 'open, public and honest social dialogue' as Greece's public opinion on whether not to get rid of lignite, is divided.

Lignite: 'Cheap and Greek'

According to Takis Grigoriou of Greenpeace, the Greeks are not pushing hard for a speedy energy transition because of several reasons.

First of all, electricity made of lignite seems cheap and most Greeks 'have no idea where it comes from.' Grigoriou. 'The people living in wider Athens, where around forty per cent of the population lives, don't know that their electricity causes death and destruction in the north. They are in their own bubble and don't care about what happens in another faraway part of the country.'

Lignite is not cheap at all. It has huge hidden health costs. 'The government conveniently forgets the huge toll lignite has on health and the environment. If we take this into account, lignite is a very expensive fuel.' The European Environmental Agency has calculated that the lignite operation is costing Greece up to 4 billion euros a year.

Another argument that the PPC and the Greek Syriza government play up in support of coal, is that lignite is 'Greek' and that the country should use its own resources to be independent. 'But lignite really is a thing of the past,' states the Greenpeace campaigner in response. 'Times have changed, we don't need to rely on coal anymore. The new Greek government should not invest in lignite but in Greece's most precious sources: the sun and the wind. Greece has a huge potential in renewable energy.'

The alternative road

Syriza tends to disagree. The leading party installed a hardliner, Panagiotis Lafazanis, on the Energy ministry who focused his work on boosting the lignite operation instead of phasing it out - despite Syriza being a conglomeration of progressives and greens.

Lafazanis was ditched by Prime Minister Tsipras in the cabinet reshuffle of July 2015, but it is unclear how Greece's energy policies will develop as the new elections in the fall and the formulation of a new government can change everything.

Not only Greenpeace but also WWF continue to rally against lignite and promote renewable energy sources. WWF published a report on the Ptolemaida V project in February 2015, claiming that with no extra costs, Greece could develop a completely renewable alternative to the new lignite power plant. Ironically, Germany plays a role in the financing of a new Ptolemaida plant - its development bank wants to provide more than 700 million euros for the project.

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