

The environment is back on the agenda



Environmental issues were extremely important in the country's struggle for democracy. Now, after years of increasing apathy, more and more people are becoming involved in environmental issues. The introduction of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in the market and several flaws in the implementation of the NATURA 2000 program for conservation of natural areas have become two of the biggest challenges facing the country. Implementing sustainable development will require that the Government safeguard the environment while meeting the country's energy and infrastructure needs.

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The process of democratic transition in Bulgaria could begin with the words "in the beginning there was Ecology." The environment was the issue that energized Bulgarians more than any other in the 1980s. Its key role in the country's civil struggle began with what first appeared to be a relatively localized issue: rampant gas pollution in the border city of Rousse, caused by effluent from a chemical factory in the Romanian town of Giurgiu.

The "Civil Committee for Environment Protection of Rousse" was the country's first major dissident organization since the establishment of Communist rule. For the first time in four decades, ordinary citizens, joined with intellectuals and leadership members of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) in an independent mobilization.

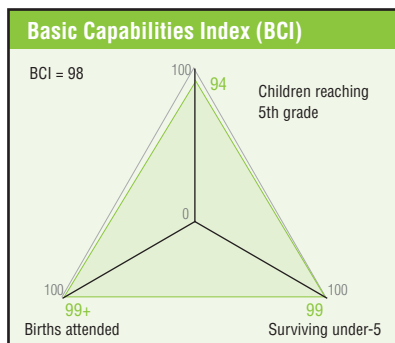
This campaign infused the Bulgarian transition with a strong environmentalist sensibility; the main topic of the so-called "Big Change" was precisely the air we breathe. Environmentalism also became a catalyst for a proliferation of Green parties and movements.

Unfortunately, soon after the 1989 democratic changes, the "old" dissidents were marginalized. The public became more concerned with the price of bread than a clean environment. This shift in popular attention quickly became evident in election results.

Environment back on the agenda

Only now, years later, has environmentalism enjoyed a resurgence in public consciousness. This time the initial focus was legislation on Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO). As in Rousse, parents are taking a leading role, this time to ensure their children do not grow up on genetically modified food.

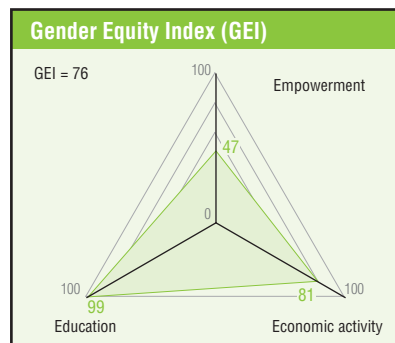
A bill liberalizing the production and release of GMOs on the market passed a first reading in Parliament in January 2010. This bill replaced a general prohibition of GMO products with a general authorization, although it made their release into the environment and the marketplace contingent on approval by the Minister of Environment and Water who then consulted with a panel of 15 scientists.



Less than a week later, on 28 February 2010, thousands of Bulgarians gathered for a rally and concert in front of the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia under the slogan "For a GMO-free Bulgaria! Let's Keep Our Land Clean and Protect Our Children's Health!" The parents who were the driving force behind this initiative were joined by organic and other farmers, beekeepers, scientists and environmentalists. Nevertheless the GMO Act was adopted, along with several harmful amendments in early March.

On 13 March 2010, scores of women, from the "Big-mama" web forum demanded the resignation of the Minister and Deputy Minister of Environment and Water and the Chair of Parliament. Four days later, activists mobilized in a "Nation-wide Protest against GMOs" in Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv, Pleven, Rousse and other cities. Two petitions were circulated throughout the country, one to ban the maize hybrid MON810, produced by the Monsanto Corporation, in Bulgaria,¹ and another against several amendments to the GMO Act.² Activists also created several anti-GMO groups on Facebook. These actions culminated in protests in front of Parliament, which won official promises that the GMO Act would be amended.

Within three months, the strongest, most successful civil campaign in Bulgaria's most recent history won over public opinion. Instead of the originally planned legislation opening the country to GMOs, on 2 February 2011, the Government enacted a total ban on the cultivation of genetically modified maize MON810. This law, passed at the



initiative of Agriculture Minister Miroslav Naydenov, made Bulgaria the seventh European Union (EU) member state – after Austria (1999), Greece (2005), Hungary (2006), France (2008), Luxembourg (2009) and Germany (2009) – to impose a total ban.³

Protected areas and Natura 2000

NATURA 2000 is the most significant EU initiative for conservation of the environment and sustainable development of regions with nature preserves. Each member State is obliged to establish its own network of protected nature zones that will protect land, plants and animals of European importance.

The criteria for inclusion in the network are laid out in the EU's two fundamental directives for the protection of environment: Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and wild fauna and flora ("the Habitats Directive") and Council Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds ("the Birds Directive").

Unfortunately, in many cases the zones are only protected on paper. In more than 300 instances, departments of the Ministry of Environment and Water have failed to implement required environmental assessment procedures for projects in Natura 2000 zones, both along the coast and in the mountains.

1 See: <forthenature.org/petitions/12/>.

2 See: <grazhdani.eu/peticija.php?c=gmo>.

3 Derechos Humanos del Campesinado Nekazarien Eskubideak, *Bulgaria bans MON810 and will not support GM contamination of feed*, (february 2011), <www.derechoshumanosdelcampesinado.org/en/medioambiente/397-bulgaria-bans-mon810-and-will-not-support-gm-contamination-of-feed.html>.

One egregious example is the official response to the project for extension of the ski zone above Bansko in the Pirin Mountains. If completed, ski runs and facilities will occupy 11% of Pirin National Park, up from the 0.2% that it currently occupies. In addition to the new ski runs, the project, which was commissioned by the Municipality of Bansko, envisages more hotels, including some on the mountain, as well as an airport, spa complexes and roads.⁴

When the project was presented in February 2011, it was lauded by Tseko Minev, President of the Bulgarian Ski Federation, head of the First Investment Bank and a relative of the concessionaire of the Yulen Ski Zone. "Promoting Bulgaria as a ski destination is more important than the populist environmental arguments against winter resorts," he declared. "Any criticism of the ski zone pales next to the publicity for Bulgaria that we can make in two hours, two days in a row all over the world [in broadcasting the Men's World Cup for skiing]. And we have already heard all the threats of calling for infringement procedures by Brussels".⁵

Skiing their way out of responsibilities

In October 2009, the European Commission initiated proceedings against Bulgaria for allowing a ski road on the mountain, built by Yulen. The new project, far more ambitious and intrusive, includes two more ski runs and a second cable car lift. The Ministers of Regional Development and Economy have generally supported the development of the region and these investments, but "within sustain-

able parameters, respecting both regulations and the mountain."⁶ Given the scale of this project, the Government response is ambiguous at best, if not disingenuous.

The State is clearly supporting the initiatives of Mr. Minev, providing him with generous state subsidies in a period of economic crisis and massive cuts in welfare budgets. Support for the project among local citizens, backed by the local administration and corporate interests, also helps drown out the protests of environmental organizations.

Turbines vs. birds

In the Kaliakra region, wind turbines and vacation properties are proliferating within the boundaries of the approved NATURA zone, despite warnings from environmentalists that this construction is irreversibly destroying the last remnants of the Dobrudja steppe and its bird habitats, as well as threatening bird migration routes. Once again, the Government, in particular the Ministry of Environment and Water, as well as local municipalities, have chosen to sacrifice nature to investor interests.

So far, investors have proposed 340 projects in this zone; several have already been built in the protected zone. One of these is a wind farm, a joint project of the Bulgarian firm Inos 1 and Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. Its value is about EUR 250 million, according to the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB). The 35 wind turbines disrupt the migration of birds and threaten their lives. The farm has also destroyed

the steppe in the area, resulting in a EUR 5,000 fine imposed by the Ministry of Environment and Water. More than 200 other wind farm projects are planned in Kaliakra; the Government's rationale for giving them the green light in a protected zone is a desire to adhere to the Kyoto Protocol and commitments to the EU to generate at least 16 percent of the country's energy from renewable sources by 2020.⁷

Environmentalists, in contrast, have for years demanded the adoption of a national strategy for the development of renewable energy sources, which would include a mandatory environmental assessment for all wind farm projects. So far, no such strategy has been proposed.

It is likely that the EU will launch two more infringement procedures against Bulgaria, one for the Kaliakra projects, and the other for failure to protect wild bird habitats. In fact, the Bern Convention has already opened a Kaliakra case file. Kaliakra is one of six designated NATURA zones (out of 114) which have suffered major damage. The others are Tsenralen Balkan, the Lom River Valley, Rila, Pirin and the Western Rhodopes.

At a "Sector Strategy to Attract Investments in Bulgaria" conference held in May 2011, the Government announced its priority sectors for economic development. Along with agriculture, the food and drinks industry, healthcare and the water sector, they included construction of roads and ski runs. The key question for the environment is whether the Government can successfully develop these sectors while promoting sustainable development. ■

4 Radio Bulgaria, *Pirin National Park is again at the crossroads*, (17 March 2011), <bnr.bg/sites/en/Lifestyle/MapOfBulgaria/Pages/1703PirinNationalParkisagainatacrossroads.aspx>.

5 Quoted in M. Enchev, *Dnevnik*, (28 February 2011).

6 Ibid.

7 Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (OSW), *Bulgaria: the role of nuclear energy and renewable sources of energy emphasised in the country's energy strategy*, (2011), <www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/ceweekly/2011-06-08/bulgaria-role-nuclear-energy-and-renewable-sources-energy-emphasised->>.