

# **Renewable energy transition in Bulgaria: a critical perspective on governance and power**

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More than a decade after the adoption of the European Union's (EU) first Sustainable Development Strategy, the actual implementation of national sustainable development and energy policies still remains a challenge. Bulgaria, an EU member-state since 2007, has had to resolve particularly difficult issues. The country is the poorest EU member-state; thus although the price of electric energy is the cheapest within the EU, many Bulgarian citizens suffer from energy poverty. Consequently focusing on Bulgaria as an analytical case study of the challenges of the renewable energy transition will provide insights into the pathways towards green energy transition within an Eastern European context as well as in other developing settings.

EU's objectives are focused on achieving smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth by 2020<sup>1</sup>. Bulgaria has also pledged that it will achieve these goals. Mirroring the European 2020 strategy, Bulgaria has also introduced a national 2020 Strategy. The country was supposed to reach the European goal of 16% of its energy mix coming from renewable sources by the year 2020. The goal was reached already in 2012, giving rise to self-congratulatory discourses such as: 'we are among the most forward European countries' or 'Bulgaria – leader in renewable energy in south-East Europe.' However, while the stance of Bulgaria's government has been positive, the sector is said to be 'in crisis and unsustainable' (Martino, 2015).

The mandatory purchase of renewable energy from the distribution network is one of the elements that, in recent years, has led to significant growth of the final price of the energy consumed by households and businesses. The difference with the market cost is covered by the National Electric Company (NEK), which passes on the losses, at least in part, to the final consumers. In Bulgaria, which remains one of the poorest EU members, the rise of the bills has created discontent and social tension which peaked in February 2013, when the centre-right government of Boyko Borisov was forced to resign because of street protests against the "crazy bills", amid allegations of speculation against the distribution companies (of foreign ownership) that manage the power grid. NGO experts have pointed to the lack of government attention paid

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<sup>1</sup> The Renewable Energy Directive 2009/28/EC ("the Directive") established a European framework for the promotion of renewable energy, setting mandatory national renewable energy targets for achieving a 20% share of renewable energy in the final energy consumption and a 10% share of energy from renewable sources in transport by 2020.

to the social cost of energy. Consequently, in spite of the contribution of subsidies for energy sources, such as the coal power stations to the higher energy prices, the ‘popular anger is directed almost exclusively against green energy’ (Martino, 2015). Citing the rising costs and the early achievement of the objectives, subsidies to renewable sources were gradually cut, and a moratorium on new installations was imposed in August 2012.

The discussion argues that in order to successfully meet the challenges of renewable energy transition and sustainable energy governance, consideration should be given to both the technological/ industrial and social/civic dimensions of the energy transition. This analytical stance draws on the Science and Technology Studies (STS) perspective that the energy systems are not only characterized by their physical and technological features but are also entwined with political philosophies, social practices, cultural norms and economic rationales (Gailing and Moss, 2016). Energy transitions are thus sociomaterial reconfigurations and transforming energy systems means transforming the social. The transition literature has been criticized for assuming that innovators only pursue responsible interests and for ignoring inequalities and conflicts caused or exacerbated by transitions (Shove and Walker 2007; Lawhon and Murphy 2012). Energy transitions are definitely power-oriented: they are subject to specific interests and can cause unequal effects. Furthermore, while transforming social and cultural relations and structures, they can also reflect and reinforce existing power relations (Rutherford and Coutard 2014). There is a need, therefore, to seek ways of conceptualizing power in energy transitions that go beyond simplistic hierarchical perspectives (Strunz 2014). Instead, one should adhere to a relational understanding of power as a collectively produced force that is simultaneously inscribed in new socio-material configurations, in the tradition of the scholarly thought of Michel Foucault. Foucault emphasizes the productive nature of power, which in the guise of certain discourses, rationalities and other “technologies” of power shape the subject positions of actors. These technologies of power can be materialities (like energy grids or other infrastructures), institutions, organizations, knowledge-driven actions, bodies, lifestyles and so on. Consequently, social power is constituted by the regulation and self-regulation of embodied action (Häkli 2009 , 628).

Consequently, the current discussion is informed by an analytical perspective, which uses Foucauldian political philosophy and critical discourse analysis striving to engage with both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ discourses, in order to explore the public debates about the renewable energy transition. As it concern the top-down governance of Bulgaria’s renewable energy transition – it has proceeded under clearly identifiable administrative leadership. The two key public institutions that are responsible for the achievement of the country’s energy

ambitions are the Ministry of Economy, Energy and Tourism (MEET), which is in charge of the country's energy policy and the State Energy and Water Regulatory Commission (SEWRC), in charge of the tariffs and licences of the companies in the gas, electricity and district heating sectors. In addition, since 2011 the Sustainable Energy Development Agency (SEDA) has been responsible for the energy efficiency policy. SEDA is an executive agency within MEET, and is the legal successor of the Energy Efficiency Agency (created in 2002). However, the largely state-led restructuring efforts have concentrated on seeking technological solutions in conjunction with state-centric administrative incentives. Thus, while there has been an abundant acknowledgement that in Bulgaria the technological side of the energy transition needs significant improvement, the recognition of the importance its civic dimension has been lacking.

Concurrently, with the state-led renewable energy transition efforts there has been an emergence of broad public, bottom-up discourses, as well as (often contradictory) livelihood strategies and practices existing on a broad range of continuum, which ranges from resisting and contesting what has been seen as a flawed state policy implementation to embracing it and seeking creative adaptations. So far these bottom-up perspectives have remained outside of the research attention.

The discussion approaches the green energy transition from a standpoint, focused on exploring the ways in which the relations between citizens and a state are constructed, enacted and imagined. The presentation is informed by an analytical viewpoint, which uses grounded theory and critical discourse analysis to explore the public discourse about the construct of the Bulgarian renewable energy transition – as a socio-political goal comprised of environmental, technical, managerial-economic and, social dimensions. The analysis explores the the industrial and civic transformations which the Bulgarian energy transition entails, critically evaluating which frames dominates the discourse and in what ways is its dominance justified as well as which perspective has become marginalized. The discussion elaborates on the forms of identities produced through the policies and policy implementations critically evaluating to what extent the social justice issue of energy affordability is part of the green energy debate as well as how is the position of the citizen-consumer mapped within the public discourse.

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