


PUBLIC (LACK OF) AWARENESS AND CIVIC (NON) PARTICIPATION IN THE GREEN TRANSITION IN BULGARIA

Veneta Krasteva

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences



Abstract: The purpose of this article is to examine the state of some societal features that enable people to participate in decision-making processes, in order to increase the prospects for developing fair policies for Bulgaria's green transition. Through the lens of concepts of informed citizen (R. Dahl) and communicative rationality (J. Habermas), we use three dimensions of analysis: individual awareness, communicative environment, civic participation. Data obtained through qualitative and quantitative research methods were used in the text. The findings show significant deficits in all three dimensions we examine. This leads to a risk of adopting political decisions that do not meet socially acceptable compromises and justice requirements. The result is political decisions in regard to the green transition that, although legal, often remain illegitimate for the majority of Bulgarians.

Keywords: public awareness, civic participation, green transition, decision-making, justice, Bulgaria

Author Biography: Dr. Veneta Krasteva is Associate Professor at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (IPS-BAS), department "Public Policies and Social Changes". She works in the field of public policy analysis, employment and unemployment, transition from education to work, poverty and social exclusion, green transition. Researcher in numerous international and national projects; member of National Council for Equal Opportunities of Women and Men with the Council of Ministers. Author of two books, many articles and research reports.

Introduction

In the article, Bulgarians' awareness of significant social changes, such as the green transition, and their willingness to participate in various related public initiatives are analysed. These two aspects - public awareness and civic participation - are defined as prerequisites for implementing fair green transition. In the analysis data obtained via quantitative and quality methods are used. Quantitative empirical information was collected through a

national representative survey of the adult citizens of Bulgaria (conducted in the period April 27-May 10, 2023). The quality information used for the analysis is obtained through: 31 in-depth interviews with representatives of state institutions, local government, trade union organisations, employers, NGO sector and researchers (carried out in the period May 11-June 6, 2023) and three civic panels in the cities of Kyustendil, Pernik and Stara Zagora (held in the period May 15-June 26, 2025). The conduct of civic panels two years after the collection of initial information has allowed to track whether and what kind of changes have occurred in the surveyed issues. Combining quantitative and quality methods enable researchers to integrate two types of data to solve specific research issues¹ within one survey. The data obtained through different methods complement each other², thus achieving greater depth of the analysis³.

We will discuss the issue of public awareness and civic participation based on the informed citizen concept (R. Dahl) and communicative rationality concept (Habermas), which allow to combine individual and collective level of awareness. They will be analysed in three dimensions:

- Individual awareness - seeking information about important public issues, ability to understand and criticism.
- Communicative environment - built by media freedom; access to information, variety of perspectives and adequate public debate.
- Civic participation - participation in discussions, forums and activities, involvement in public organisations and contribution to public dialogue.

Why is public awareness important?

Public awareness refers to the access to information and knowledge that people have about significant public issues. It enables people to understand and engage in public problems, allowing them to make informed decisions, to participate in democratic processes and to advocate for their

¹ John Creswell, *Steps in Conducting a Scholarly Mixed Methods Study*, DBER Speaker Series, Paper 48, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2013), <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1047&context=dberspeakers>.

² Alan Bryman, *Social research methods*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³ Jennifer Mason, *Six strategies for mixing methods and linking data in social science research*, (Manchester: ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, 2006), Working Paper 4.



rights and interests⁴. When public is well informed on a certain problem, it is more likely to require that actions be taken by its political representatives, or that policies, which solve a problem be developed and to approve or reject political decisions that have been imposed. A number of studies have shown the strong connection between people's awareness and active participation in climate change⁵. Awareness provides an opportunity for empowerment of the individuals - it contributes to active participation in taking decisions concerning public good. On the other hand, public awareness strengthens social cohesion by promoting understanding and dialogue between different groups⁶ and may lead to a change in public opinion and behaviour regarding a problem⁷.

Awareness is also an important prerequisite for adequate civic participation in public processes and in making decisions on significant social changes. In the absence of reliable information, objective knowledge and ability to use them in public dialogue, conditions for their manipulation by different power (political and/or economic) groups are created. In this way, public power can be used to promote interests, which are both far from justice and deeply unfair to a large segment of society.

Public awareness depends on individual actions to increase knowledge and information about what is happening, on the one hand. According to Robert Dahl⁸, one of the criteria for the functioning of democratic societies is the availability of enlightened understanding so that citizens can understand political alternatives and make informed elections. Not only access

⁴ Thomas Reece, "Public Awareness and It's Impact in Empowering Individuals for Societal Change", *Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs*, Vol. 11, № 2 (2023).

⁵ Patrick D. Nunn, William Albersberg, Shalini Lata, and Marion Gwilliam, Beyond the core: community governance for climate-change adaptation in peripheral parts of Pacific Island Countries, *Reg Environ Change*, Vol. 14, №1 (2014), 221–35; Nnaemeka Madumere, Public enlightenment and participation—a major contribution in mitigating climate change, *Int J Sustain Built Environ*, Vol. 6, № 1 (2017), 9–15; Christine Wamsler, Johanna Alkan-Olsson, Hallvard Björn et al., Beyond participation: When citizen engagement leads to undesirable outcomes for nature-based solutions and climate change adaptation. *Clim Change*, Vol. 158, № 2 (2020), 235–54; Farzaneh Shaikh Khatibi, Aysin Dedekorkut-Howes, Michael Howes, et al. Can public awareness, knowledge and engagement improve climate change adaptation policies? *Discov Sustain* Vol. 18, № 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-021-00024-z>.

⁶ Reece, "Public Awareness," 2023

⁷ Khatibi et al. Can public awareness; Emma Etim, Leveraging public awareness and behavioural change for entrepreneurial waste management, *Heliyon*, Vol. 10, № 21 (2024), e40063, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e40063>.

⁸ Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its critics*, (Sofia: Critique and Humanism, 2006).

to information but also understanding of this information is taken into account so that people can participate meaningfully in the decision-making process. Education plays a significant role in building informed citizens. Base on education, criticism and reflexiveness skills, skills to recognize manipulation and skills to understand political processes must be developed and culture to participate in debates and elections must be created.

An informed citizen is a prerequisite for effective participation and democratic control, since the awareness of public agenda and political processes in it means reducing the gap between knowledge of political elites and knowledge of ordinary citizens. However, individual awareness is not sufficient and whether it can be used effectively in the decision-making process depends on the quality of public discourse and public sphere. Habermas⁹ thinks of the public sphere as a space where citizens participate in a rational and critical debate on issues of common interest. Through equal participation of citizens in public discussions and the ability of society to build a unified position via rational dialogue, not through manipulation or private agreements, legitimate political decisions that reflect public interests can be taken¹⁰.

It can be summarised that public awareness is not limited to the number of informed people, but to the quality of communication and structure of public consultation. This perspective is especially important for a fair green transition, the changes to which will affect the labour market, energy prices, access to resources, and every aspect of people's lives. Without widespread discussion and active civic participation, green policies are exposed at risk of being imposed by a small group of people, whose decisions are not generally driven by achieving socially equitable targets.

2. Individual Awareness

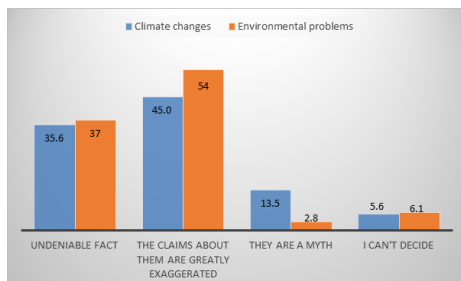
The first aspect to which we will pay attention to is how well Bulgarian citizens are informed about important public issues. In particular, we will pay attention to the interest of Bulgarians in climate change and environmental pollution.

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms. Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The communicative mind*, (Sofia: Critique and Humanism, 2021).



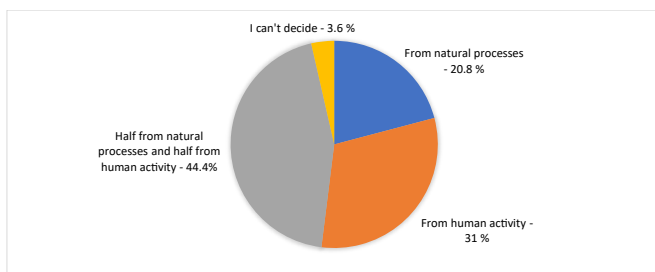
Figure 1: Opinion on climate change and environmental pollution (%)



Source: National Representative Survey carried out within the framework of the K17-06- H55/13 project

The data shows that most Bulgarians are aware of climate problems and environmental pollution. However, a large number of people define the seriousness of the problem as greatly exaggerated. This is an aspect that may have a strong impact on the attitude towards measures proposed by politicians to limit certain proceedings categorised as the main reason for environmental changes. The attitude towards policies depends to a large extent on the understanding of Bulgarians of the extent to which these changes result from the human activity.

Figure 2: What cause climate change? (%)



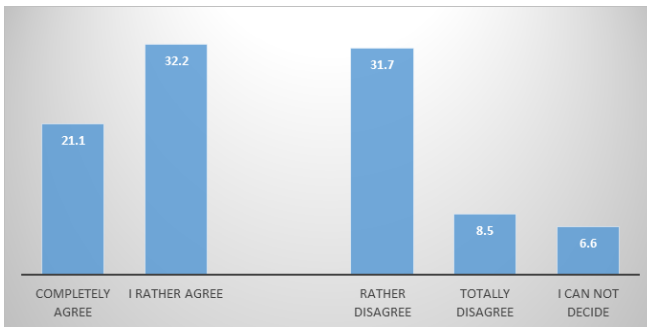
Source: National representative survey carried out within the framework of K17-06- H55/13 project

Bulgarians have moderate opinion on the connection between climate change and human activity - 44.4% believe that climate change results from both natural processes and human activity; 31% attribute climate

change to human activity only, and 20.8% claim that climate change is only due to natural processes. The fact that larger part of the people believe that changes are due only to natural processes may affect public debate, since it is assumed that they would not support measures and policies affecting human activities.

The hard positions on green policies also depend on whether Bulgarians look at the environmental pollution as a problem.

Figure 3: Climate change is dangerous for us and future generations (%)



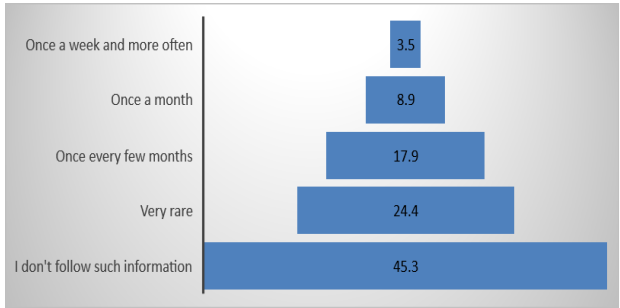
Source: National representative survey carried out within the framework of КП-06-H55/13 project

The position of the respondents is divided on this issue, and although people who believe that climate change has negative effects on life (53.3 %), the share of those who reject this claim is large - 40.2%. Our survey does not find a relation with the age of respondents, and the relation with education is weak ($p = 0.164$) - division of positions is also observed between people with the same educational degree. Forming two opposite positions is a circumstance that politicians should take into account when proposing changes in people's activities, led by the conviction that climate change should be stopped.

After the review of people's opinion on environmental problems, it is important to understand how often they receive information based on which they make this opinion.



Figure 4: How often do you receive information about climate change and environmental pollution? (%)



Source: National representative survey carried out within the framework of КП-06-H55/13 project

Data shows that only one-third of the respondents have made an informed opinion on these issues. It can be said that some Bulgarians draw conclusions about the problems without being informed about the topic. This makes it much easier to manipulate public opinion and to enforce decisions that do not meet the interests of most people. Participants in the interviews also express concern that the lack of information creates conditions for political manipulations:

“We have no real debate on the issue because one of the parties is afraid to enter into commitments for a variety of reasons, and the other party absolutely mercilessly plays on the topic. And more convincing, because one of the parties is very timid and doesn’t want to tell the truth. You cannot blame populists, since this is their job, they have to play on the topic to the extreme. But the other party is missing and here is the big deficit.” (Interview 03)

Education plays a significant role in the formation of a well-informed citizen. Based on learned knowledge and skills in the education system critical thinking and skills for recognising disinformation, understanding different perspectives and making rational dialogue should be built. In Bulgaria, however, we are facing significant problems in the education system and a worrying trend of decline in educational achievements among adolescents. The results of PISA 2022 show that over half of the Bulgarian

students who participated in the survey are under the critical threshold of mathematics and reading achievements, which may be interpreted as insufficient cognitive competences of more than half of the students to solve daily problems¹¹. The problem is not limited only to lack of knowledge, but also to insufficient communication skills with others, to inability to understand the other point of view, and to hold an adequate debate that would lead to a mutually acceptable result for both parties.

A number of interviewees shared an observation and we also heard during the discussions in the citizen panels that there is no clear idea of what exactly the green transition is. For significant part of Bulgarians and for some politicians the green transition is only “the absorption of European funds”. According to the interview participants, people need to be educated about the real meaning of the green transition, about the reasons that require a change in the way of production and consumption and about the ways in which these changes may occur, and in general to obtain real and objective knowledge of what is happening in the world:

“A national educational initiative related to the transition is needed. For example, Bulgaria must be educated about energy efficiency. [...] And it is very, very important for people to have reliable, serious information. This means very serious commitment, budget, competence and capacity, and everything required by the national media.” (Interview 27).

This points to the media and public environment and to the possibilities for disseminating objective knowledge and information and conducting adequate public debate.

2. Communication environment

The second aspect we will focus on is the communication environment in Bulgaria. It includes the adequacy and objectivity of the disseminated information, the availability of access to information about political alternatives, the decisions of government and the consequences of various policies.

¹¹ Svetla Petrova, PISA 2022: *Quality school education and high educational achievements are still a distant goal for Bulgaria*, (Sofia: Institute for Research in Education, 2023), <https://ire-bg.org/pisa-2022/>.



The data from our survey shows that Bulgarians are convinced that public should be informed about the decisions made and should be convinced that they are in the interest of all – nearly 93% of Bulgarians completely or somewhat agree with this statement. Analysis of the information obtained from the three citizen panels also shows that residents of the most affected regions attach particular importance to the access to objective and timely information about the upcoming changes.

Informing the public depends to a large extent on the media, which highlights the importance of the freedom of these media. According to an assessment of the organisation Reporters Without Borders, media freedom in Bulgaria is deteriorating and in 2025 the country drops from 59th to 70th place (out of 180 countries) in terms of media freedom¹². Monitoring of media environment in Bulgaria¹³ shows that the independence of media is severely limited due to political and economic dependencies. This applies to both public and private media. Media pluralism is also threatened by the concentration of ownership in the media market, which creates conditions for easy manipulation of public opinion and for preventing the dissemination of certain information or knowledge.

The level of media freedom and independence also influences the decision of which people, defined as experts, are given the opportunity to express an opinion. In Bulgarian media space we see launching of the same experts, whose statements represent lobbying for certain economic and political interests. According to some of the participants in the interviews we conducted, these speakers are used to validate political and/or economic interests:

“And of course another problem is that they also created, using these hidden economic players, pseudo-civic organisations that legitimise their speech and interest.” (Interview 12).

In addition, there is also a problem of spreading false information/misinformation. One of the interviewees is quite critical of the competencies of the

¹² Forbes Bulgaria, “Media freedom in Bulgaria has deteriorated sharply”, *Forbes*, May 2, 2025, <https://forbesbulgaria.com/2025/05/02/svobodata-na-mediite-v-balgariya-ryazko-se-e-vloshila-prez-2024-gl>.

¹³ Orlin Spasov, Nely Ognyanova and Nikoleta Daskalova, *Monitoring media pluralism in the European Union: 2025 results. National report: Bulgaria*, (Sofia: European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 2025), <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/92885>.

participants in the public discourse in the country:

“[...] the rulers are not prepared and talk nonsense. [...] journalists are also not prepared on this topic and report wrong facts and information. They ask questions that are incorrectly formulated.” (Interview 14).

The poor knowledge of the topic among journalists is also commented on in other interviews in the survey, and some respondents share that, in their opinion, training for journalists on this topic must be conducted (Interview 18).

A significant problem of the communication environment in Bulgaria is that the public discourse on the green transition is absent from the topic of the fair transition and of the consequences that it could have for both the regions that are most affected and for entire society. There is no preliminary independent, scientific assessment of the social consequences of the changes resulting from restructuring of the energy sector and economy, and from the reforms that Bulgaria has undertaken to implement. The debate that is being conducted in the public space is only discussing who will supply the state with the required resources for electricity production and whether and who will implement the nuclear power plant project. This shows an overlap of the expert speech with the interests of business and politicians, which raises doubts about the presentation of partial information and distortion of the knowledge that citizens receive. One of the interviewees shared:

“Because in Bulgaria misstatements are widely circulated. And the role of the media here is also to disseminate these misstatements. When false information is cited, there must be still some reaction or intolerance to the dissemination of false or manipulative information. This is also done by politicians - I see that information is not disclosed, that half-truths and obsolete data are being misinterpreted and that no one rebuts this. And when it is repeated once or twice, it becomes a narrative.” (Interview 01).

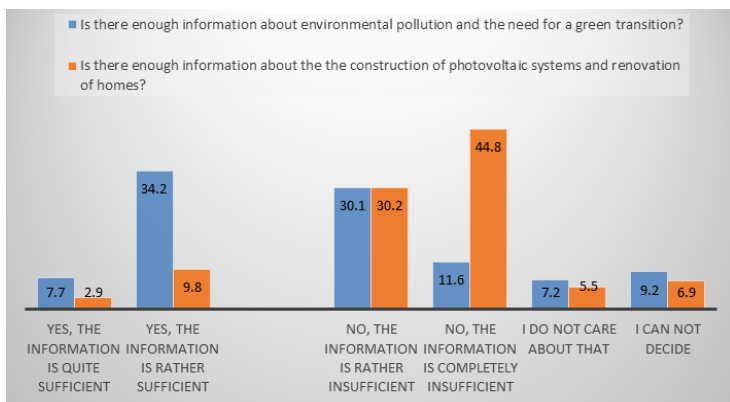
Partial information is presented in the public space. This is seen, for example, in the manner in which Bulgarian politicians (do not) share information



about the commitments they made in Brussels. Most of the participants in our interviews, as well as people from all three citizen panels, indicated that information about what and when was agreed is not shared with the public in a timely manner; there is no open debate, which presents all requirements and options and which discusses the decisions.

This all leads to limited access to information for Bulgarian citizens on issues, which are important for society. As regards the information available to society about the environmental pollution and the need for a green transition, the data from the survey shows division of the opinions.

Figure 5: Assessment of the access to information (%)



Source: National representative survey carried out within the framework of КП-06-H55/13 project

When it comes to information about specific financing opportunities related to the green transition, people are much more categorical about the fact that the information is not sufficient. An analysis of a survey distributed among interested organisations and specialists of the accessibility to the National Energy Efficiency Information System also comes to conclusions about the difficult access to information: some participants in the energy services market find it difficult to identify the diverse information systems based on the sources and content in this area; end users are not familiar with and do not receive sufficient information on the legislation in

the field of energy efficiency¹⁴. The information from the interviews shows that the lack of information about the opportunities that people may benefit from is a significant deficit that prevents the green transition from taking place in a fair manner. One of the interviewees points out that the lack of information centres is an obstacle to the transition, and if there are such centres, the required information and competence are missing:

“There should be an opportunity to clarify all things in advance. In Bulgaria, there is not even a single information centre for this. The so-called “municipal” centres, which are actually managed by Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, are supposed to be regional information centres under the EU funds; however only one or two people are working there. And they do not know what to say to people about the recovery plan, because they do not have information.” (Interview 18).

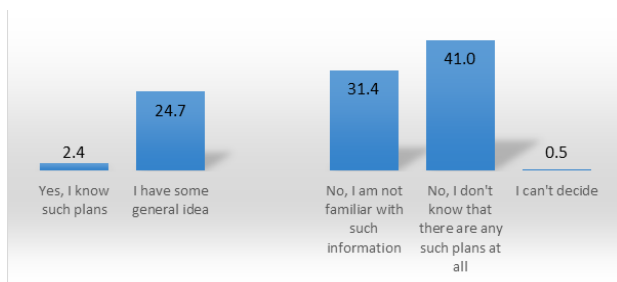
The lack of institutional support and mechanisms created by the local and central authorities through which people seeking information may be directed is clearly visible.

The access to information about the political decisions of the government and the consequences of the implementation of various policies, which is essential for the quality of communication environment, can be demonstrated through data on the extent to which society is aware of the fate of the regions that will be most affected and through data on how the changes in them will affect the local economy and society as a whole. Bulgaria has approved territorial fair transition plans for three regions – Stara Zagora, Pernik and Kyustendil. These three regions are identified in the 2021 - 2030 Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (INECP) as the most vulnerable regions to the transition, since they are characterised by concentration of local coal mining and coal-based energy production, and as economic structure related to these activities. Within the borders of the three regions, coal mining and related industries structurally define the local economy and are strongly influenced by the decarbonisation measures. However, the data shows that most Bulgarians do not have information about these documents.

¹⁴ Kamen Kolev, Dimitar Baev, Zdravko Georgiev and Siliviya Todorova, *Analysis of the use, accessibility, informativeness and derivation of trends and recommendations for improving the accessibility of the National Energy Efficiency Information System*, (Sofia: Bulgarian Industrial Association, 2020).



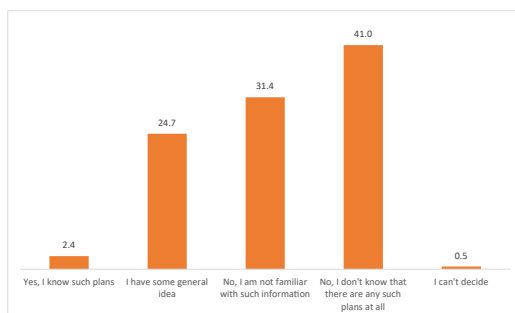
Figure 6: Do you have information about the developed territorial fair transition plans in the coal mining regions? (%)



Source: National representative survey carried out within the framework of КП-06-Н55/13 project

Only 2.4% of the respondents are familiar with territorial plans, and nearly 25% have an overview of them. Most respondents have no information about the documents – a total of 72.4%, with 41% of them not even knowing about their existence. This excludes a large part of society from discussing essential issues that concern both the residents of the given regions and everyone else. The data that shows people’s conviction about the possibilities of participating in the development of such plans is alarming.

Figure 7: In your opinion, do citizens have the opportunity to participate in the development and adoption of local fair transition plans?



Source: National representative survey carried out within the framework of КП-06-Н55/13 project

More than half of respondents believe that even if they are active and wish to participate in the process of elaborating development plans for the af-

affected regions, they have no real opportunities to do so. People who participated in the citizen panels conducted in the three most affected regions also shared this belief, which also results from the actual process of developing territorial plans for their cities. The state delegated the creation of these plans to a private consulting firm – PwC – PricewaterhouseCoopers.

This data shows the low trust in the public decision-making process. This points to the third dimension, which we will use to examine the awareness of Bulgarians – the participation of people in various initiatives that influence the decision-making process.

3. Civic participation

The involvement in various joint activities related to important public issues creates an environment for sharing knowledge and exchanging arguments and an opportunity to take consensus decisions on problems that cause controversy. Active citizen participation helps to resolve conflicts and to enhance engagement with policy outcomes¹⁵.

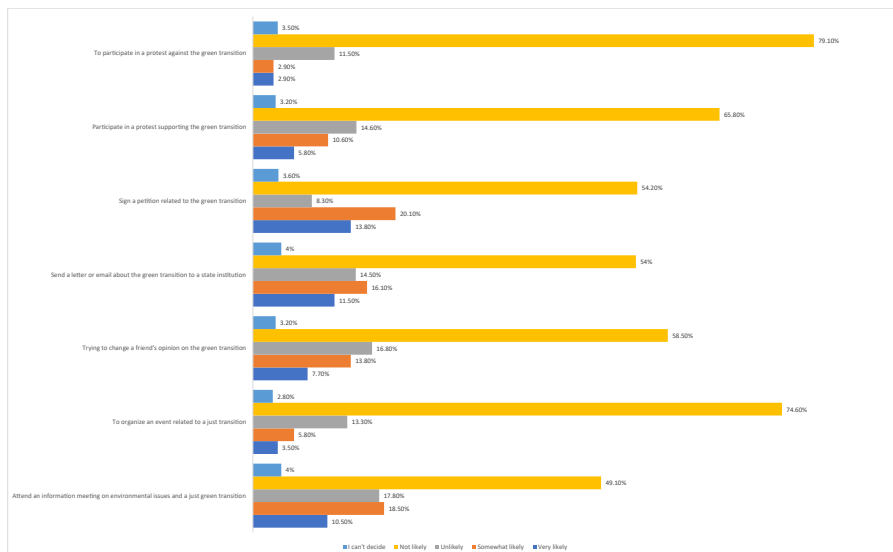
As regards Bulgaria, data from the European Values Study shows that the country has one of the lowest levels of willingness to participate or actual participation in various forms of political activities, such as demonstrations, petitions, boycotts, strikes¹⁶. Our survey shows continuation of the trend of low civic activity. Figure 8 shows how likely would Bulgarians be to engage in various activities related to the green transition.

¹⁵ European Environmental Agency, *The case for public participation in sustainability transitions*, Briefing no. 18/2023, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/the-case-for-public-participation>.

¹⁶ Loek Halman, Tim Reeskens, Inge Sieben and Marga van Zundert, *Atlas of European Values: Change and Continuity in Turbulent Times European Values Series*, Vol. 1 (Tilburg: Open Press TiU, Tilburg University, 2022).



Figure 8: How likely would you be to participate in various activities related to the green transition?



Source: National representative survey carried out within the framework of КП-06-H55/13 project

The majority of Bulgarians indicates that they are unlikely to participate in various initiatives related to the green transition, especially if they are related to direct action, which must be performed by them – for example, participating in a protest or organising an event. Activities that are more passive, but still provide an opportunity to express an opinion – signing a petition, sending an email to a state institution – are more likely to be implemented.

The distribution of responses regarding people’s willingness to participate in a protest for or against the transition is interesting – nearly 66 % say that they are unlikely to participate in a protest in support of the green transition, and nearly 80 % say that they will not participate in a protest against it. In other words, people do not support it, on the one hand, and they are not against it, on the other hand. This may be defined as indifference to what is happening with the green transition, which results from both the lack of information and knowledge and from the lack of trust in the entire process, since decisions will be made at another level, regardless of the cit-

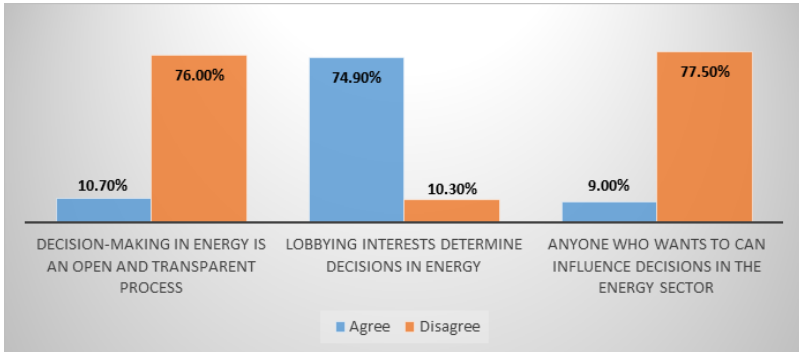
izens' position.

Some of the interviewees state that Bulgarians do not believe that their participation may lead to real change:

“Well, in Bulgaria people are not aware of their role and do not trust their role in society; in particular, that they can solve problems, that they can be part of various social innovations... Common thinking is missing in Bulgaria.” (Interview 01).

When asked to rate the transparency of decision-making process in Bulgaria on a scale from 1 to 9 (where 1 is no transparency at all, and 9 is full transparency), the responses of nearly 70 % of Bulgarians fall within the range of 1 to 5, with 14.1 % of the respondents saying that there is no transparency at all. The assessment of decision-making process in the energy sector is similar.

Figure 9: Assessment of the transparency of decisions in the energy sector



Source: National representative survey carried out within the framework of КП-06-Н55/13 project

The majority of respondents agree or mostly agree that decisions in the energy sector are taken in a manner that meets lobbying interests. This also explains the high percentage of people who are convinced that not everyone may influence the decision-making process on energy issues, and the fact that the process is not transparent and open.

The participants in the interviews we conducted also confirm that the pos-



sibility for stakeholders to influence decisions related to the green transition is small. The problem has at least two aspects – one of them is related to formal, and the other to uneven involvement of stakeholders. One of the interviewees stated:

“Formally, consultations with stakeholders are held however their opinions are not taken into account. The negotiations with the EC services are carried out within the administration, without reaching prior national agreement on a number of sensitive topics. [...]. Formally [decisions are taken by] stakeholders, experts and general public but really [by] the administration.” (Interview 28).

Public discussions where citizens may express their opinions are held; however their proposals and concerns are not reflected in any way and most often the result is legitimisation of decisions already taken by the government. The consequence is adopted strategies and action plans in the field of energy, which are legal, but are not accepted by local communities. This may be demonstrated by the protests organised by those working and living in the most severely affected regions, such as Stara Zagora, and by those living in other regions of the country where these political decisions are implemented - for example, decision on construction of photovoltaic power plants in the lands of Kyustendil district¹⁷ and Radomir municipality.¹⁸

The second aspect, which we mentioned above, is the uneven participation of stakeholders in decision-making processes – the specific needs of regional actors are not taken into account. A representative of the executive authorities we interviewed noted that proposals from representatives of the most affected region – Stara Zagora, Radnevo and Galabovo – were not paid attention by the empowered persons: “So, here, the presence of local representatives in the national processes is low, to say the least” (Interview 02). One of the conclusions we draw based on the information taken from the citizen panels is precisely the belief of local residents that their voice is

¹⁷ BNR 16 July 2025. Another protest in front of Kyustendil Municipality against the construction of photovoltaic power plants, <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/102185480/poreden-protest-pred-obshtina-kustendil-sreshtu-izgrajdaneto-na-fotovoltaici>

¹⁸ Struma Newspaper. 23 Ayryct 2025. The Radomir village of Galabnik protested against the construction of a solar park a kilometer from the Dyakovo dam. [The Radomir village of Galabnik protest- ed against the construction of a solar park a kilometer from Dyakovo dam – STRUMA Newspaper](#)

not heard and that decisions are taken by people who have no idea of their real problems and real possibilities for solving them.

A recent study of three coal mining regions in Bulgaria, Greece and Poland confirms that the lack of information and the insufficient engagement increases uncertainty among local stakeholders, which creates real risks to the long-term planning and investment in fair transition initiatives in the coal mining regions¹⁹. The low trust in the transparency of decision-making process leads to non-acceptance of the imposed policies and to their definition as unfair to society²⁰. If the process is transparent and public trust in the actors is high, then the acceptance of reforms may be improved, even on politicised issues, such as the green transition.

Conclusion

The analysis showed that there are significant deficits in the three aspects that we examined – individual awareness, communication environment and civic participation in Bulgarian society. The deteriorated level of individual awareness influences and is influenced by the quality of communication environment in Bulgaria. The result is political decision-making that, although legal, often remains illegitimate for the majority of Bulgarians, especially for those from the most affected regions. The lack of transparency of decision-making in the energy sector and the unclear and scarce information reduce the trust in the political process, which repels citizens from participating in discussions of issues, which directly concern them. This, in turn, makes the process even more opaque and increases the risk of adopting political decisions that do not meet socially acceptable compromises and justice requirements.

¹⁹ Lefteris Topaloglou, Amalia Kouskoura, Olga Janikowska et al., The interplay between just energy transition and community engagement: Assessing collaborative pathways in Greece, Poland and Bulgaria. *Energy Research & Social Science*, Vol. 116, 103708, (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2024.103708>.

²⁰ Nicolás Bronfman, Raquel B. Jiménez, Pilar C. Arevalo and Luis A. Cifuentes, Public Acceptance of Electricity Generation Sources: The Role of Trust in Regulatory Institutions. *Energy & Environment*, Vol. 26, Nº 3 (2015), 349-368. <https://doi.org/10.1260/0958-305X.26.3.349>.



Acknowledgment:

This article was prepared as part of the research project “Public Capacity for a Just Green Transition” funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science (under contract КП-06-Н55/13) within competition for funding of fundamental scientific research – 2021, with the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences as the beneficiary.