


THE GREEN FRONTIERS OF CAPITAL: DECARBONIZATION AS A MARKET RESET

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Abstract: This article zooms in on expert pronouncements about the ongoing Green Transition (GT) in the Bulgarian energy sector. Drawing on 26 in-depth interviews, the article shows how decarbonization pundits marshal existing transitological expertise and inscribe the coal phase-out in a generalized market reform. In the process, they build a discursive bridge between decarbonization and liberalization of the energy system, while doubling down on key tenets of the European Green Deal that prioritize private investment in the GT. In the end, decarbonization emerges as a new frontier of capital accumulation, sidelining questions of justice – climatic as well as social.

Keywords: decarbonization, liberalization, liberalization, European Green Deal, coal

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Introduction

In this article, I scrutinize expert discourses on the green transition (GT) for the Bulgarian energy sector. The analysis is based on 26 in-depth interviews and 3 civic panels we convened within the framework of the project “Public Capacity for Fair Green Transition” (КП-06 ПН55/13). I show how experts achieve identity between divergent categories, such as decarbon-

ization, liberalization and privatization, despite the absence of strict logical necessity between them. The Bulgarian energy sector is still heavily dependent on locally sourced lignite – the annual share of solar power in the electricity mix clocks in at 12% in 2023.¹ Bulgarian baseload capacity is split between coal and nuclear power (around 60-70%), with hydro, solar and wind making up the rest of the mix. The main coal power plants are located in the south-eastern Stara Zagora region. Thanks to them the region sports living standards closely trailing behind those of the Sofia region: Bulgaria's economic powerhouse.²

In recent years Stara Zagora has been the site of sporadic eruptions of protest actions by miners and energy workers against the scheduled phased-out of coal and the job uncertainty it portends. Although it promises that “no one will be left behind,” the European Green Deal reproduces well-known recipes from the policy tool-kit of the 1989 transition: investment guarantees and redistribution of public funds to private businesses, and structural reforms that impose liberalization of the energy market.

The expert class plays a central role in this process, more specifically the green transition experts, studied by Frandsen and Hasselbalch.³ These comprise consulting companies commissioned specializing in roadmaps for GT as well as NGOs with established transition expertise in democratization and green policies. Thus, a “post-IPCC” expert ecosystem emerges in which the line between science, politics, and business becomes rather porous.⁴

Frandsen and Hasselbalch (2024) show that energy transition experts inhabit a field close to that of climate change researchers, but at the same time occupy an intermediate area between science and politics, translating abstract scientific climate data into concrete and often nationally deter-

¹ Stanchev, Ivailo. “Collapse in coal-fired power generation and record for renewables in June.” *Capital*, July 4, 2023. Accessed October 2, 2025 from https://www.capital.bg/biznes/energetika/2023/07/04/4503320_sriv_pri_toka_ot_vuglishta_i_rekord_za_vei_prez_juni_v (In Bulgarian)

² 24 Chasa. “Stara Zagora region ranks fifth in terms of salaries in the country, with an average of BGN 1,998.” *24 Chasa*, October 9, 2024. Accessed October 2, 2025 from <https://www.24chasa.bg/biznes/article/19072260> (In Bulgarian)

³ Søren Lund Frandsen & Jacob A. Hasselbalch. “Who are the green transition experts? Towards a new research agenda on climate change knowledge”, *WIREs Climate Change*, 15(6), e917 (2024).

⁴ Ibid.



mined decarbonization policy.⁵ These experts dwell in an ecosystem populated by a variety of – usually *private* – agencies, think-tanks and companies, such as KPMG, McKinsey and PriceWaterhouseCoopers (which have also consulted the Bulgarian government). Their main role is to develop recommendations and policies on decarbonization and climate adaptation. The geographer Svenja Keele shows how the growing importance of climate consultancy business is shifting the fight against climate change from a public good and science to a privatized science, which acts not in service of society, but in service of corporate profits.⁶

In the Bulgarian context, the transfer of transition expertise to decarbonization policies allows experts to marshal key elements from the repertoire of what Nikola Venkov-Rose calls the “liberal milieu”⁷: anti-corruption, anti-populism, market reform and Europeanisation. The decarbonization expertise foregrounds a paradox: experts present the transition as inevitable yet hindered by “obstacles” (what the demands of the workers in the sectors slated for coal phase-out are perceived to be).

I explain the equivalence experts establish between decarbonization and liberalization with Ernesto Laclau’s theory of “empty signifier.”⁸ The empty signifier is a common denominator of diverse demands, organized in an equivalential chain of semantic links by virtue of their shared hostility to an “outside” element. In this case, the GT gets re-signified in a chain of equivalences vis-a-vis the “populism” of the fossil, “post-Soviet”, state monopoly over energy and “anti-European” forces more generally, such as trade unions and some political parties that protest against the European Green Deal. In this way, the expert discourses achieve “ontological complicity”⁹ between the environment, corruption, “Europe”, renewable energy, populism and climate mitigation. This has become particularly acute in the wake of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 which sent energy prices

⁵ Ibid. p. 2

⁶ Keele, Svenja. “Consultants and the Business of Climate Services: Implications of Shifting from Public to Private Science.” *Climatic Change* 157, no. 1 (2019): 9–26

⁷ Nikola Venkov-Rose. “Local Uses of Propaganda: Popular Liberal Perceptions in Bulgarian Discussions on Facebook.” Paper presented at the forum *Perpetual War, Ceaseless Crises*, Sofia, June 13–15, 2025.

⁸ Laclau, Ernesto. *Emancipation(s)* (London and New York: Verso, 1996).

Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre. “Toward a Reflexive Sociology: A Workshop with Pierre Bourdieu.” In *Language, Culture, and Society* (edited by Loïc Wacquant) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

es into the stratosphere and provided renewed impetus to decarbonization as part of European efforts to delink from Russian hydrocarbons.

The short circuit that occurs between the two transitions – green and the one to neoliberal capitalism since 1989 – is mediated in part by logics immanent to the Green Deal itself. Although formally aimed at safeguarding a fair transition, it reproduces well-known logics of development, tried and tested in post-socialist countries, including Bulgaria. The key instrument for implementing the Green Deal – EU Cohesion Fund – aims at stimulating private investment in decarbonization.¹⁰ The poorest regions in Europe are once again becoming territories conducive to capital circulation through incentives for foreign investment, tax relief and redirection of public funds to the private sector. The Green Deal rests on the same neoliberal foundations: free market, international assistance, infrastructure projects and “fantasies of upskilling labor.”¹¹ Its design is mapped on the matrix of the 2015 Juncker plan of public guarantees for private investment that aimed to kick-start the European economy after the financial meltdown of 2009 and the debt crunch that rattled the Eurozone in the following years. Paired with the post-pandemic EU Recovery and Resilience Facility (NextGenerationEU), the Green Deal further reinforces the impression of a “green reset” of the market glut triggered by Covid, the energy crisis and inflationary pressures in recent years, whereby saving the climate is only a side effect of saving the market. How do green transition experts lubricate these developments?

Actors and content of the green transition expertise in the Bulgarian context

The experts’ case for the GT is shot through with a tension: they simultaneously revive the communist-era rhetoric about the inevitability of the transition but at the same time they talk about it in an apophatic key¹² - as something absent and recognizable in relation to what it is not. Most often, because someone or something is interfering.

¹⁰ Adrienne Buller, *The Value of a Whale: On the Illusions of Green Capitalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

¹¹ Tsvetelina Hristova & Todor Hristov, “The Bulgarian Green Deal”, unpublished paper, n.d.

¹² Jacques Derrida, “How to avoid speaking: Denials”, in H. Coward, & T. Foshay (Eds.), *Derrida and negative theology* (State University of New York Press, 1992).



The expertise pivots on several axes: health, populism, awareness, Europeanization, and market reform. In the discourses under consideration, the climate is often of secondary importance, while environmental and health problems stand out as an argument for closing down the thermal power plants. I define the phenomenon as a tactical ontological complicity, because climate and environment are different things: fitting power plants with SO₂ filters improves air quality, but it will not reduce their harmful impact on the climate. According to the experts, in addition to harming health, the thermal plants are also unprofitable. Here, public health fuses seamlessly into market health in a chain of equivalences. As one interviewee said: “The cost to the state budget is extremely high and there is no reasonable justification for the plants to be kept on life support.”¹³ The fact that power plants do not operate on market principles but survive thanks to subsidies is a common argument for their closure wielded by the experts. However, subsidies and budget lines have also been extended to green energy—for example, until recently the Bulgarian state bought “green power” from private solar and wind plants at an artificially inflated price to stimulate investment in the sector.

The second problem is related to information. Following Isaiah Berlin’s two concepts of freedom¹⁴ we can distinguish two types of public awareness: negative and positive. The first foregrounds the lack of awareness, for example when experts condemn the poor communication strategy of the state that keeps people in the dark. The second stands for awareness which is illegitimate since it results from “rumors”, “Russian propaganda”, “populism” and even “outside agitators”. The two types of information or awareness should not be taken as polar opposites but as positions on a common spectrum. The former is often understood as creating fertile ground for the latter (for example, “rumors”).

I will illustrate this with the reaction of one of the respondents to the question of whether social impact assessment of the GT is necessary: “The Green Deal covers to a large extent the social aspect of the transition. That is why I say that there is absolutely no communication at the national level,

¹³ Interview 20. All interviewees have been anonymized.

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

just like there is currently no communication about the euro.”¹⁵ The expert reduces resistance to decarbonization to misinformation. In the process she links the sensitive topic of the euro (Bulgaria is slated to join the Eurozone in 2026 amid heated public debates and protests) to the chain of equivalences of decarbonization. This collapses both issues into the media conflagration of “for or against Europe”, while skirting serious engagement with each. In the process structural economic and social disruptions get replaced by the assumption that “we simply have not explained things well enough to the people”. As another expert surmises, the whole GT issue is shot through with “serious misunderstanding, mighty populism, and a lack of expertise.”¹⁶ But even the report of PricewaterhouseCoopers and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, commissioned by the government, admits to the risk of precisely what the miners are afraid of: “the transition towards a low-carbon economy will strongly affect labor market dynamics. [...] If adequate skills development measures are not put in place to match changing labor supply and demand, unemployment may rise, dismissed workers may incur income losses, and migration trends may intensify towards larger and more dynamic economic centers.”¹⁷ Furthermore, “households are affected through the change in energy sources: energy prices may rise, residential buildings and houses may need to be adapted to new sources of heating, both implying larger household expenses.”¹⁸ The policy texts clearly demonstrate that the problem is not so much information (or the lack thereof) but to the very structure of the transition, if workers are made to foot the bill. The transition will surely deepen old inequalities, and create new ones if it is not politically controlled – not through more brochures, but through real protections and guarantees for workers.

The Phantom Lignite Tripartite Council

Building on the above-mentioned distinction between negative and positive information, I will show here that just like the opponents of the GT

¹⁵ Interview 23

¹⁶ Interview 08

¹⁷ PricewaterhouseCoopers and World Bank, *Report on the development needs and objectives to 2030 in view of reaching climate neutrality and consistency with key national and regional strategies and plans*, (Sofia: 2023), p. 15

¹⁸ PWC, Report., p. 16

It is symptomatic that the word “disturbs” in the earlier version 3.2 of the Report (2023, p. 45) has been euphemized to “change” in the final version 3.3 of the Bulgarian-language report (2023, p. 27).



sometimes attribute it to external forces and pressure (usually “Brussels”), its defenders also resort to conspiracy theories to explain the perceived slacking of the transition. Following the example of Berlin, we may also distinguish the actors sabotaging the transition into *negative* (such as structural lacks of state capacity) and *positive*, that is to say actively hindering the transition: unions and oligarchs. Thus arranged, they form what we may call a phantom lignite tripartite council. Unlike the real National Council for Tripartite Cooperation where business associations, trade unions, and state representatives haggle over economic policy and industrial relations, the phantom council seems to work in concert *against* the transition.

The two “positive” types of actors that the experts hold accountable for delaying the liberalization of the energy market and preventing the transition from happening are the oligarchs and the trade unionists. Since trade unions are considered to be the bigger obstacle to decarbonization, a respondent invokes the legacy of Margaret Thatcher as a model for successfully dealing with them. As is well known, Thatcher crushed the miners’ strike in 1984-1985 with the help of the repressive arm of the state, mainly the police, but indirectly involving the army, too.¹⁹ In the following quote, her image metaphorizes a gender-fluid or pan-gender apology of state violence against workers with a pedigree from Thatcher to Macron: “politicians [don’t] have the political ‘balls’ while there are not enough women in politics. Because in the area of climate change women are the ones who have achieved the greatest results. Starting with Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady who fought the coal unions [...] down to Macron’s [pension] reform.”²⁰ However, as the respondent says, “there has to be dialogue first.”

The curious elevation of Macron into an honorary womanhood, while Thatcher becomes a woman with “balls” should not distract us from the main point. In fact, the 2023 revolt against Macron’s neoliberal pension reform was crushed in the most brutal manner possible, leading to the loss of limbs and eyes.²¹ This is not a precedent. In 2020, during the Yellow Vest

¹⁹ Seumas Milne, *The enemy within: The secret war against the miners* (London and New York: Verso, 2004).

²⁰ Interview 07

²¹ Associated Press, “Report: Man loses testicle after clubbing by Paris police”, *Associated Press*, January 22, 2023. Accessed October 3, 2025 from <https://apnews.com/article/france-government-police-brutality-law-enforcement-paris-f612dad367dee4c202821c3e9e1f3bdc>.

protests against Macron's carbon tax which shifted the social costs of carbon emissions cuts to working people and the poor, the police violence Macron unleashed led to the loss of hands, eyes and even testicles²², and was condemned by a number of international reports on human rights violations.²³ Symbolic balls seem to be a direct threat to real ones, while police brutality is a condition of possibility for market reforms and for decarbonization, along with "legislation, transparent justice reform and functioning institutions."²⁴

Virtually all interviewed experts voiced negative views about the unwillingness of unions to cooperate in the drafting of roadmaps for mass layoffs and the self-elimination of energy workers from the sector. They were also surprised that unions tend to dominate the conversation about social rights, instead of proposing only market-based solutions. As a respondent argues, "I am not against the fact that unions will lose two or three million of [membership] fees. But they keep proposing solutions that are not based on market principles. They want a large state-owned enterprise where they can simply automatically sign a new collective agreement with the state, and keep their members, and their dues."²⁵ On this view, unions emerge as an anachronism that somehow survived socialism, that is still accustomed to state employment and resists the dynamics of the market.

Some of the experts make the case for labor mobility, calling on workers to upskill or migrate. Others expect workers to try their luck in entrepreneurship: "there is a real opportunity to try something related to entrepreneurship; that there are useful things related to retraining and skills for the new times, regardless of the level of qualification."²⁶ In short, if workers stop being workers and upskill as managers and business owners, the transition will be fair.

²² Kapsas, Andre. "The Repression of France's Yellow Vests Has Left Hundreds in Jail – And Crushed Freedom of Protest", *Jacobin*, November 17, 2020. Accessed October 1, 2025 from <https://jacobin.com/2020/11/gilets-jaunes-yellow-vests-protests-france-police-brutality>.

²³ France 24, "Rights groups accuse French police of brutality in pension protests", *France24*, March 23, 2023. Accessed September 29, 2025 from <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230324-rights-groups-accuse-french-police-of-brutality-in-pension-protests>.

²⁴ Interview 18

²⁵ Interview 07

²⁶ Interview 06



If upward social mobility fails them, workers can simply move elsewhere. As a respondent from Stara Zagora argues, “Everyone will have the opportunity for new professional career, there will be social protection, there will be opportunity for retraining, if workers wish to benefit from such an opportunity and their family will also be supported if they have to find work elsewhere [...] The idea of labor mobility is poorly understood by Bulgarian society and the paths for labor mobility are too few.”²⁷ The expert presents precarious and labor migration in a positive light, as hinging only on a change of mindset – as if labor migration is an unproblematic process. This normalizes the idea that workers must adapt to economic interests even if they have to upend their entire lives in the process.

The state and municipal institutions make up the second part of the phantom lignite tripartite council. According to the respondents, the institutions lack competence, qualified personnel and are corrupted; the faltering judicial reform was also mentioned several times. For example, an expert who also served as an environmental minister argued that “a large number of institutions lack capacity, there are no people who understand the matter and who could implement these policies.”²⁸ A Stara Zagora-based expert similarly thinks that the GT could become fair by introducing: “with separate legislation, transparent justice reform and working institutions - these are things that our country does not have. This cannot happen without an institutional framework, institutionality, and institutions that cooperate each other.”²⁹

Granted, any just transition needs robust institutions. But given how some of the experts praised the ways Margaret Thatcher and Emmanuel Macron manhandled the workers resisting their reforms, are we warranted to include the repressive state apparatuses in the category of “robust institutions”? It seems that the market should operate both within ordoliberal institutional framework, as Foucault³⁰ shows, and on the sporadic waves of violence unleashed by the repressive state system. As Marx reminds us,

²⁷ Interview 23

²⁸ Interview 05

²⁹ Interview 23

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

the history of the so-called “primitive accumulation” of capital is “written in letters of blood and fire.”³¹

The third part of the tripartite council are the ‘old-guard’ capitalists resisting the changes. One of the respondents depicted local businesses as inert, cartelized and refusing to leave their comfort zone.³² The notorious Bulgarian energy oligarch Hristo Kovachki was frequently invoked. The metonymic slippage between “Kovachki” and “coal plants” helps experts inscribe decarbonization into the decades-long struggle of Bulgarian liberals against the oligarchy, which again has no explicit connection to climate goals beyond what experts construe. But if all power plants were publicly-owned or the property of moral and honest businessmen, would they warm the planet less?

Sometimes experts invoke the threat of the so-called “social parasitism”. As an expert intoned, “the state-owned [plants] employ a number of people who do not really work. And this is an obvious fact for *all* state-owned enterprises. No state structure is managed on *purely market principles and this is a problem*. Because when appointed, the political leader begins to hand jobs to [cronies] performing *parasitic* functions and occupying *parasitic* positions.”³³ The respondent invoked the European Commission, which reports that “almost all state-owned energy companies [...] are actually bankrupt or barely survive. That is why they must be restructured “to operate on *market* mechanisms.”³⁴

We can conclude that the Green Transition provides an opportunity for a green restart of the market economy, especially in the energy sector, considered as the last bastion of socialist “inefficiency” and centralization, just like anti-corruption of the beginning of the new millennium helped buttress the faltering Washington Consensus.³⁵ (Krastev 2004).

³¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A critique of political economy. Volume I* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1996), p. 506

³² Interview 18

³³ Interview 07

³⁴ Interview 07

³⁵ Ivan Krastev, *Shifting Obsessions: Three Essays on the Politics of Anti-Corruption* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2004).



Bulgaria: The Green Tiger of the Balkans

The expert discourses about the GT weave the chain of equivalence into a linear temporal arc, where the socialist past, totalitarianism and the planned economy sit on one end while the future of democracy, decentralization and market economy occupy the other. Thus the experts deem the GT no less of an opportunity to catch up with our Balkan neighbors and with “Europe”. To this end, the energy sector must undergo rapid and uncompromising market reform. For example, one of the experts deployed the zoological metaphor of “the economic tiger”, borrowed from the authoritarian regimes in East Asia that leapfrogged in the 1970s and 1980s: Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan – darlings of libertarian neoliberals.³⁶ On his view,

Bulgaria has the potential to become the *tiger of the Balkans*. Because we possess three key characteristics - geographical location, resources and wealth that few countries have. In addition, we have human [capital] in Bulgaria and [in the diaspora] and ability to attract other *quality* people (I am talking about non-Bulgarians). An ability to attract the *elite* [work-force] of other countries. We must realize that Bulgaria, closed as a fortress, is the wrong [solution] for the demographic [crisis].³⁷

Here expert admiration for the authoritarian model of development of East Asian Special Economic Zones overflows into technocratic social Darwinism that purports to solve the demographic crisis not by attracting just anyone, but “quality” people. This is redolent of the bigoted hierarchization of foreign labor deployed by the former Bulgarian prime minister Kiril Petkov in a bid to calm the public about the “waves” of Ukrainian refugees in 2022: “These people are Europeans, they are intelligent, educated people. Some of them are IT specialists, highly qualified. This is not the usual wave of refugees with unclear backgrounds, maybe terrorists [read Syrian, Iraqi, Afghani refugees]. Some IT guys came to me and told me we just want to have a good a WIFI to work from home, and nobody in Europe is afraid of them.”³⁸

³⁶ Quinn Slobodian, *Crack-up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2023).

³⁷ Interview 07

³⁸ Eurocom, “Accused of racism?: Arab TV channel Al Jazeera quotes Petkov on Ukrainian refugees”, *Eurocom*, February 28, 2002. Accessed October 1, 2025 from <https://eurocom.bg/2022/02/28/obvin->

Energy rich and energy poor: towards the question of justice

We asked the experts what kept delaying the definition of energy poverty (at the time of conducting the research, there was no such definition yet). One of them rejected the connection between energy poverty and GT straight away: “Energy poverty has nothing to do with the GT. This is how society is manipulated. The energy-poor are not poor due to the GT. They have been energy poor for years.”³⁹ The claim that energy poverty “has nothing to do with the the GT” ignores key policy papers of the European Union which poses energy poverty as a direct outcome of the transition due to environmental measures like carbon pricing.⁴⁰ While the expert is not wrong to say that energy poverty in Bulgaria predates the GT, this does not make it less relevant in its context because the GT will likely inherit and amplify existing disparities in the access to energy.

Energy poverty is subject to heated definition debates because liberalization of energy markets and the privatization of energy producers and distributors are part and parcel of (market-based) decarbonization. Since member-states are not supposed to intervene in self-regulating energy markets, the only mechanism they have at their disposal are subsidies and compensations. This logic crystalizes in the scramble to formulate an energy poverty definition. To distribute compensations frugally it becomes necessary to single out the most deprived citizens, instead of subsidizing everyone’s energy consumption. One respondent told us that he expected a restrictive definition to be adopted because “most people are poor anyway” and the thrifty Bulgarian welfare state would not support them.⁴¹ According to Teodora Peneva, Bulgaria’s go-to authority on energy poverty, at least 2 million Bulgarians are energy poor.⁴² So, instead of adapting en-

en-v-rasizm-arabskata-al-dzhazira-tsitira-petkov-za-ukrainskite-bezhantsi-video/ (In Bulgarian); see also Maria Cheresheva, Ukrainian Refugees in Bulgaria: In the Trap of Non-Existent Integration, *FES*, April 2022. Accessed September 25, 2025 from https://bulgaria.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/publications/2022/Ukrainian_Refugees_in_Bulgaria_WEB_ENG.pdf

³⁹ Interview 23

⁴⁰ European Commission, European Green Deal: Commission proposes transformation of EU economy and society to meet climate ambitions, *EC*, July 14, 2021. Accessed October 02, 2025 from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_3541.

⁴¹ Interview 26

⁴² Biliiana Veselinova, “Assoc. Prof. Teodora Peneva tells Trud News: Over 2 million Bulgarians are energy poor”, *Trud*, October 30, 2024. Accessed on October 1, 2025 from <https://trud.bg/a/articles/доц-д-р-теодора-пенева-пред-труд-news-енергийно-бедни-са-малко-над-2-млн-българи> (In Bulgarian)



ergy policy to social reality, reality itself is “edited” through restrictive definitions that allow for artificially delimited allocation of resources, without budging from austerity measures and the Maastricht deficit straightjacket of 3%. Such a strategy turns social policy instruments into a mechanism that does not support the needy but optimizes the budget. However, it is instructive how the very search for a definition of energy poverty develops in parallel with the pressure for liberalization of the electricity market – as an indirect indictment of energy market’s liberalization capacity to increase inequalities.

We took the definition as an occasion to raise the question about poverty and how the transition affects the different classes in society. The responses we received show the experts’ mission as an educational and an emancipatory one: to debunk populism and to educate the poor. Many an interviewee relayed the proverbial fable about the hungry man and the fish: to help a man don’t give him fish but teach him fish for himself. The role of the fish here is played by 1) education and 2) renewable energy technology.

1): Against energy poverty through education and energy efficiency: “The question is not what the definition of energy poverty says, but to realize that handing cash is not a solution. We need to make the Roma literate, to educate the grandmother, to [invest] in energy efficiency and to make [a proper] social and economic analysis. Instead of paying BGN 200-300 per month on heating, [energy efficiency] may save [them] money, thus [making the poor] feel richer.”⁴³

2): New technologies: “The Greeks, who also have an energy poor population, provide them with solar panels, so they can quickly get out of energy poverty,” argued an environmental activist who cut his teeth back in 1989. However, he admitted that this kind of assistance would likely not achieve the desired result in Bulgaria. He highlighted the risk of distorting the GT and turning it into something that can be called a “transition for the rich”: “subsidies for solar panels of up to 30 kilowatts are provided to individual households for own use. However, it turns out that some people close to the former energy minister are purchasing almost entire depopulated vil-

⁴³ Interview 07

lages in Haskovo and Stara Zagora [and benefitting from the scheme]. And it's supposedly for personal use!"⁴⁴

Conclusion

In this article, I showed how the class of (green and conventional) transition experts works to build a public consensus about the European Green Deal as an expression of an inevitable progress. At the same time, however, the experts identify some difficulties in its implementation: worker militancy, "populism", trade unions, oligarchic networks, institutional weakness and incompetence. To restart the market reform, they deploy tropes from the transition expertise of the 1990s and 2000s, when key discursive levers of democratization were anti-populism and anti-corruption. Since the GT allows for a green restart of the market economy in an energy sector deemed beholden to socialist "inefficiency" and centralization, the Green Deal can be understood as a green frontier of accumulation. As Jason Moore says in *Capitalism in The Web of Life*, capitalism is entering an "ecological phase" and, having conquered continental frontiers, it reaches out to atmospheric and photonic ones: wind and sun.⁴⁵ In the Bulgarian context this shift is peppered with transitological expertise from the 1990s.

Since unions and workers' mobilizations resist these processes, they are subject to the experts' ire, despite their historically proven effectiveness in raising income and standard of living and in improving working conditions. We are faced with a key tension between the demands for just transition and on the capacity of Bulgarian society to achieve it: while the liberal discourse emphasizes formal institutions and procedures, the real mechanisms for social justice continue to be based precisely on collective organization i.e. unionization and trade union pressure on the government. Disregarding and belittling working-class concerns risks undermining the social sustainability of the transition, entrenching inequalities, and leaving people to face demands for justice alone amid sweeping economic upheavals.

⁴⁴ Interview 18

⁴⁵ Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the web of life: Ecology and the accumulation of capital* (London and New York: Verso, 2015).



Finally, a comment on the Bulgarian translation of the Green Deal as *Zelenata sdelka* (the green transaction). It is both wrong and right. The European Green Deal is modeled on Roosevelt's "New Deal," which, however, is translated into Bulgarian as *Nov kurs* (New Course). After the Great Depression, America did indeed embark on a new course: more redistribution from the rich to the poor, active state participation in the economy. As a result, the US reduced inequality to historically unprecedented (and never to be repeated) levels. "Deal" in English also means "to distribute" and "to allocate" – so, a new course towards (re)distribution. Incidentally, it was at this very historical moment that the country embarked on a course towards nationalization of the electricity grid, giving impetus to the idea of "public power."⁴⁶

But "deal" also means transaction. In other words, translating the Green Deal as "sdelka" in this Trumpian sense, is wrong at the form, but correct at the level of the content of the package of measures aimed at restarting growth and the market by funneling public funds into private hands, thereby opening up new areas for capital accumulation where hitherto there were none or were in their infancy (such as utilities, considered "captive" to "post-Soviet" relics like state regulations). Saving the climate seems to play a secondary role to saving the market, especially after the pandemic, the energy & inflation crisis since 2022. Therefore, the choice of the word *sdelka* seems both right and wrong.

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⁴⁶ Bob Johnson, *Carbon Nation: Fossil Fuels in the Making of American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017) p. 117.