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## "I want to, but I lack desire": The green energy transition caught between expectations and possibilities

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**Abstract:** In this article, I present results of a nationally representative survey on attitudes toward the Green transition in Bulgaria, which we conducted in 2023 as part of the project "Public Capacity for a Just Green Transition" (КП-о6 Н55/13). The survey focuses on four groups of questions concerning

climate change, social justice, expectations from the new transition, and the public agenda. Based on these, I draw predominantly pessimistic conclusions about both the Green transition and the transition to liberal democracy preceding it, showing how the experience of the latter inevitably colors the former. I analyze the gap between possibilities and expectations for the new transition with reference to Jacques Lacan's theorizing about the difference between need/demand and desire.

**Keywords:** Green transition, Bulgaria, climate change, social justice, public attitudes, liberal democracy, Jacques Lacan, expectations, pessimism, survey

## Introduction

In this article, I present results of a nationally representative survey in Bulgaria on attitudes toward the green transition, which we conducted in 2023 as part of the project "Public Capacity for a Just Green Transition" (КП-о6 Н55/13). The survey polled 1005 Bulgarian citizens on questions from the importance of climate change to how just and democratic Bulgarian society is. Our team aimed at finding out if experiences of the post-1989 transition to liberal democracy and capitalism would color expectations of the coming transition in the energy sector. Being still heavily dependent on coal, supplying over 40% of the energy mix, Bulgaria has committed to decarbonization under the "Fit for 55" and the European green deal energy

and climate targets. To this end, the country has to close down the major coal plants and effect an economic transformation which stirs heated debates and opposition on part of miners and energy plant workers. In short, the European Green deal is a highly charged topic in Bulgarian society. Energy politics in general is a polarizing issue in Bulgaria. For example, in the winter of 2013 mass protests, punctuated with several acts of public self-immolation, problematized the escalating utilities costs and highlighted the social price of energy liberalization (see Tsoneva 2013a, 2013b, and 2018 for a more recent bout of fuel price hikes protests). 10 years later mass protests and highway blockades by miners and energy workers accompanied the submission of the Bulgarian Territorial Plans to the European Commission so that Bulgaria could qualify for Just Transition transfers. Parts of the arguments against decarbonization stems from the still sizable dependence of Bulgarian electricity mix on coal: despite the steadily rising share of solar, over 40% of electricity comes from coal in winter and autumn.

Let me begin with the demographic profile of the survey. It polled 1005 respondents, of whom 476 were men (47.4%) and 529 were women (52.6%). Women made up slightly more than half of the respondents. The largest proportion is over 70 years old (almost 20%), followed by the 40-49 age group. More than half of the respondents have a high school education, while almost 30% were college educated, which is in line with the typical figure for the country (27.8%).

The majority of respondents are employed, followed by

retired, self-employed, unemployed, employed on a civil contract, without a contract, and students. Finally, 6.5% of respondents fall outside the labour market due to disability or other reasons. People's family profile is that of the classical nuclear family of 2 or 3 members: 31.5% and 31.3% respectively, with the remaining percentages distributed among one member (11.7%), four people (21%) and 4.6% for five or more people. In terms of income, people with a net income between BGN 1,352 and BGN 2,000 prevail (17.9%), followed by the low-income groups BGN 251-504 and BGN 505-780 (respectively 16.2% and 15.7%). They are followed by people earning between BGN 781 and BGN 1,351 (27.5% in total) and the shockingly high proportion of people earning up to BGN 250: 6.7%. Understandably, the percentage of the high-income category BGN 3001-5000 is the lowest - only 0.2%. Over 10% refuse to disclose their income.

The survey questions fall into 5 categories: ecology and climate, awareness and participation, equity, anticipated effects of the Green transition, and how they envision transition justice. Let's move to the questions polling people's attitudes to climate change and decarbonization. This part of the survey contains 27 main questions (some of them with sub-questions), broken down by themes such as climate crisis, sense of justice, political priorities, opportunities and willingness of citizens to participate in energy decisions, motivation to participate in energy cooperatives or awareness events on decarbonisation, urgency of measures, who should pay the price of climate rescue and energy transformation, among others. We began with the climate. Climate change is:

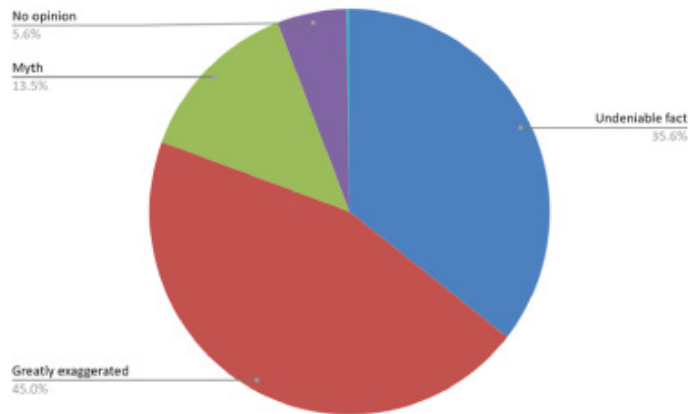


Fig. 1. Attitudes to climate change

And although the majority express skepticism about climate change, 74.1% believe that science will find a solution (selective faith, we might add, since there is complete consensus in the same science on which so much hope is placed that climate change is not a myth or exaggeration, but a fully documented and empirically supported reality). The situation is reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's broken kettle logic: "I don't believe there is a grave climate problem, but science will solve it" (2010).

As the data shows, the climate is not the Bulgarian nation's most urgent problem. The famous quip of the French Gilet Jaunes movement applies with equal force to Bulgaria: making the month's ends meet is more important than the end of the world. Climate politics is and still remains largely a middle class concern. So let's move on to the questions probing society's agenda:

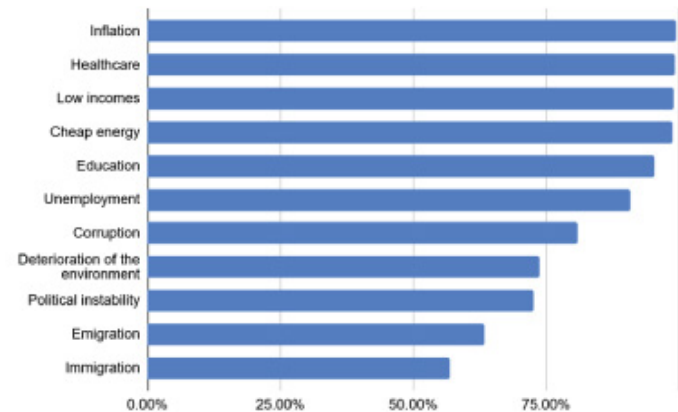


Fig. 2: The public agenda.

As the data unequivocally shows, socio-economic issues rank high on the agenda, as do healthcare and education.

Having established the public agenda, let's see what people think about the levels of fairness and transparency/quality of the democratic process in the country. We needed to get a better grasp of these issues in order to assess expectations of the fairness of the Green energy transition. Do people feel represented in Bulgaria? Compared to the results in the previous section, we can conclude that they rather are not: a big scissor has opened between the public and the political agenda. Yet, in theory, mechanisms exist in a democracy to calibrate such imbalances, as well as levers to allow citizens to connect in the public sphere and participate in the formulation of policy priorities. The following series of responses, albeit on questions posed about different topics, answer the following meta-question, taking aim at the very heart of the democratic process: are citizens empowered and informed enough to take action? Do they have access to sufficient mechanisms

to participate in decision-making? Are decisions made in their interests, and if not, in whose interests? Let us take a closer look at the data.

Information is often presented as a necessary condition for the possibility of democratic participation of citizens. This is why the public sphere receives special attention in most works theorizing contemporary liberal democracy. Starting from the axiom that free access to information and an inclusive public sphere are key values and levers for democratic participation, we decided to explore respondents' level of awareness of the Green Transition and the opportunities that energy transformation holds. People were split exactly in half between those who thought the information was sufficient (41.9%) and those who said it was rather insufficient (41.7%). The rest hold no opinion. We then moved to the availability of information and transparency in the energy sector. Are decision there made in the private or in the public interest?

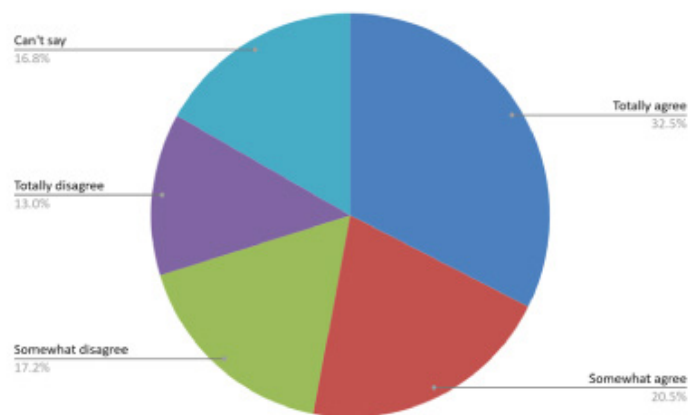


Fig3: "Decision in the energy sector are taken everyone's interest"

On the face of it, over half of respondents showed confidence in the decision-making process, i.e. that it was in the interests of all, despite a significant proportion of installed capacity being in private hands.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the answers are helped by the fact that households are still in a regulated electricity market and do not feel the chaotic movements of the exchange market as businesses do in a free market.<sup>2</sup> For households, price rises are regulated and increase regularly.

But when we rephrase the question whether lobbyists dominate the decision-making process, the following intriguing data came out: 56% completely agree with the statement, and when we add those who rather agree, we get an impressive majority of almost 75% believing that lobbyists dictate the processes in the energy sector. It is difficult to square the circle of the data from these two questions, unless we assume the existence of a cabal of highly ethical private lobbyists making decisions in the public interest. But since it is unlikely, perhaps we should just accept that people are able to reconcile any two conflicting ideas effortlessly.

<sup>1</sup> According to the latest data from the Association of solar power producers in Bulgaria (BFA), there are 255 plants operating in Bulgaria with a capacity of more than 1 MW with a total current capacity of 911 MW. The total capacity of the small ones up to 1 MW is 121 MW, but they count 851 in number. In other words, there is a large concentration of capacity in few but large companies.

<sup>2</sup> Bulgarian electricity flows via two markets: a regulated one for households and a free market for businesses. Plans to liberalize the domestic market in 2026 fell through in the summer of 2025.

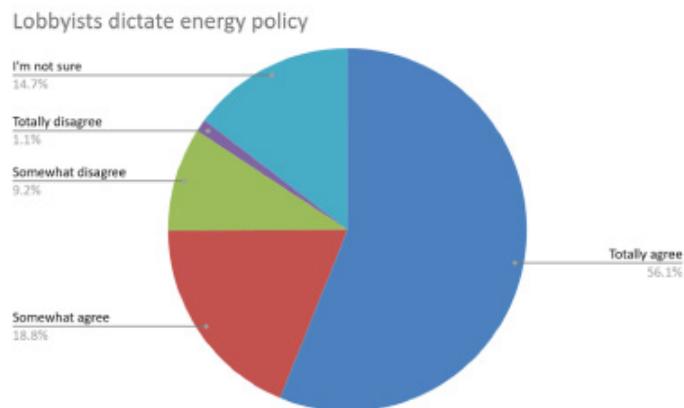


Fig. 4: The role of lobbyists.

Consistent with the question about the outsize role of lobbyists, we received extremely negative responses about the claim that decisions in the energy sector are made in an open and transparent way: as many as 76% deem the decision-making process intransparent:

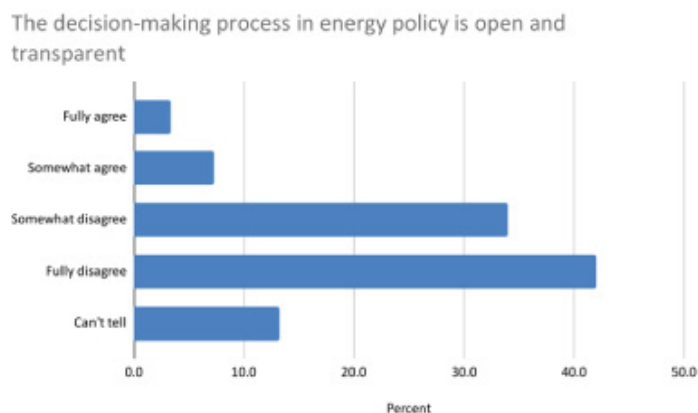


Fig. 5: Transparency of the decision-making process.

Two-thirds of people also say that it is not possible for everyone willing to influence the energy sector. At the same time, however, this does not seem to be so negative because people expect experts and technocrats to be primarily involved in energy decisions rather than it being an open and/or democratic process: nearly 90%. However, when we asked whether ordinary people should have any leverage to partake in decision-making in the sector, 69.6% answered in the affirmative. Based on the consensus around the statement below, we can conclude that people don't mind experts or even lobbyists making the decisions as long as they inform the public: a full 92.8%, but there should still be opportunities for grassroots participation:

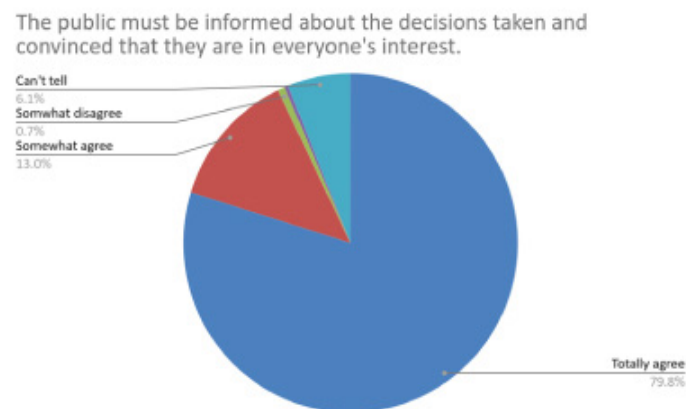


Fig. 6: Information availability.

We also resolved to check people's awareness of the Territorial plans that will determine the future of coal regions in the coming years. In general, awareness does not scale up to the importance of these plans which will directly affect

citizens and their economic situation. Less than 7 (27.1%) say they have an idea of what is at stake for the regions, but the remaining 7 have no information or idea at all:

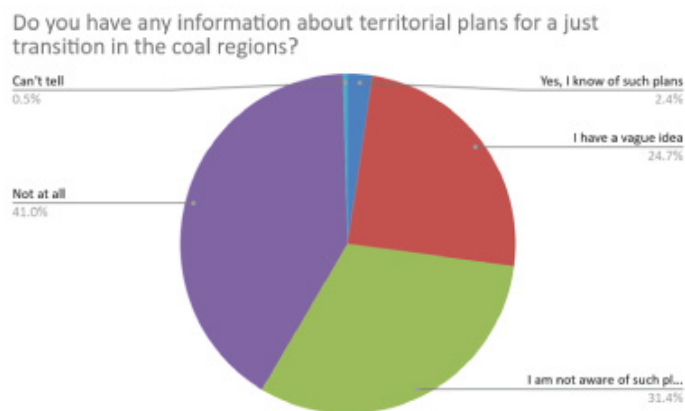


Fig. 7: The territorial plans.

As many as 75.9% are unable to engage in Territorial plans and public consultation processes, suggesting very low levels of social mobilization around the new economic opportunities presented by the coming decarbonization:

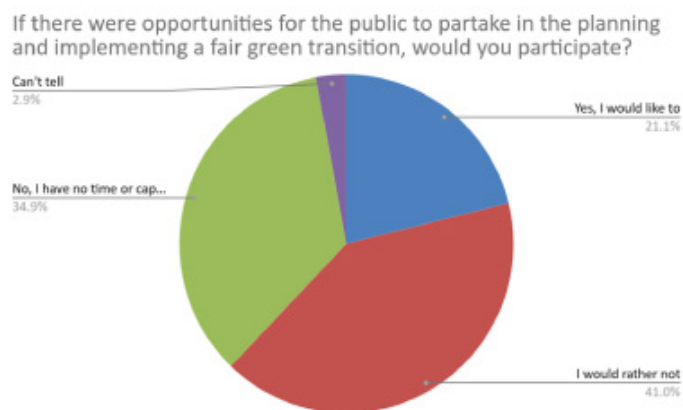


Fig. 8: Missed opportunities.

Here opens the first scissors, which is the subject of this article: on the one hand, people welcome awareness, but on the other hand, they have no desire (and sometimes opportunity) to be informed. When asked if they would attend an informational event on ecology and transition, almost half answered in the negative, and with those unlikely, the total comes to 67! In other words, people feel that the public needs to be more informed about environmental issues and options for addressing them, that there is not enough information available, but that if there were an public awareness event, they would not go. Only 6.4% would also bring a friend to such an event. Even fewer would organise such an event: only 3.5%.

Let's see where the other scissors lurk. We developed a set of questions to find out more about respondents' perceptions of fairness in society. The overall conclusion that emerges is that people are rather egalitarian and dislike the privileges of the rich (although everyone wants to be like them). Bulgarian economic egalitarianism, however, finds its limit in hegemonic meritocracy, the faith in which even widespread corruption and cronyism have failed to shake. For example, as many as 97.8% say that it is fair that he who works harder earns more, and 84% believe that everyone should get only what he has acquired by their own efforts:

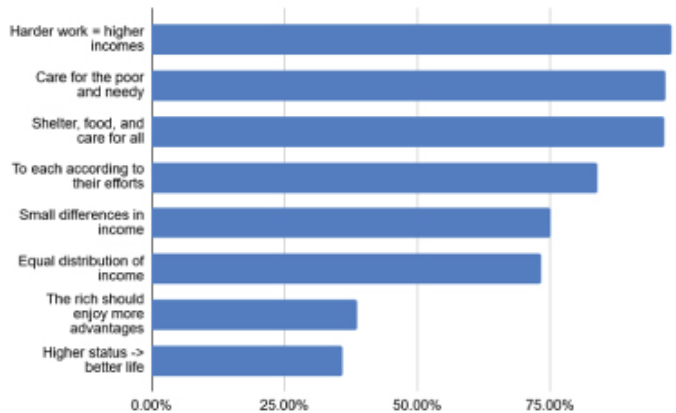


Fig. 9: "The just society ensures that"

But when we stepped out of the realm of values and asked people whether they believe that the rich in Bulgaria owe their wealth to personal merit, the consensus breaks down and people are split: 46.6% believe that wealth is not the result of hard work and ability, versus the total of 47.5% of those who believe it:



Fig. 19: Merit vs corruption.

In other words, while people profess a belief (at least in theory) in the abstract possibility of wealth honestly earned through hard work, when related to concrete examples of the Bulgarian rich, almost half of respondents deem empirically existing wealth illegitimate. Here we can use the Bulgarian sociologist Deyan Deyanov's beloved synonymous twin construct of *everyone* and *everybody*, which in Deyanov's work becomes an antinomy: while in theory everyone can sit in the chair, not everyone will in practice. While in theory every rich person may have earned their wealth through honest work, in practice not all rich (perhaps none) do.

Given Bulgaria's pronounced inequality—boasting the highest Gini index in the EU—it is unsurprising that our egalitarian respondents view Bulgarian society as fundamentally unfair. When asked to rate societal fairness on a scale from 1 (completely unfair) to 10 (very fair), the results were striking. The majority of responses clustered at the lower end of the scale, with 27% assigning a score of 4, followed closely by those selecting 3. Only 9.9% rated society as somewhat or very fair (scores of 6 to 10). In contrast, 21% gave the lowest possible scores of 1 or 2, and when combined with those choosing 3 or 4, the proportion swells to a whopping 67%. In short, most respondents perceive Bulgarian society as deeply unfair.



Overall assessment of the state of affairs along the axis of fairness  
(10)– unfairness (1). Is Bulgarian society fair?

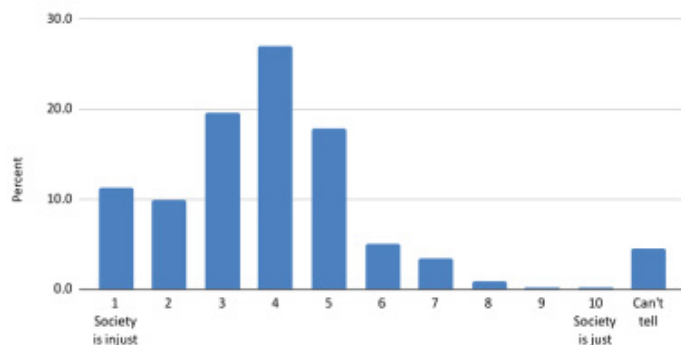


Fig. 20: Is society fair?

We asked the same question about inequalities (1 = too high; 10 = too low) and obtained an almost identical distribution of scores at the low end of the scale (i.e., more unequal), only with a greater clustering of scores. In other words, the sum of all responses giving a score up to 5 is a full 88.8, i.e. almost everyone agrees society is strongly unequal:

Your assessment of inequality in Bulgaria: 1=too much; 10=too little.

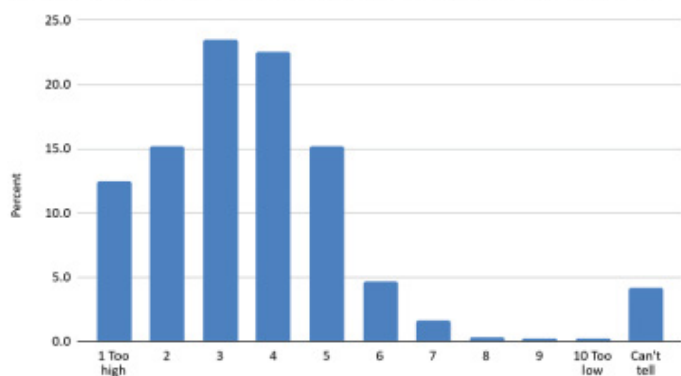


Fig. 11: How unequal is society? 1 = very unequal, 10 = very equal.

Superimposed on each other, the two graphs show an almost perfect correlation:



Fig. 12: a perfect correlation of responses.

The results shifted noticeably when respondents assessed the transparency of decision-making in society: over 46% gave positive ratings. This suggests a society that is unequal and unfair, yet relatively transparent. In short, the data paints a picture of a cynical society. I understand cynicism, following Žižek, as the open and conscious enactment of wrong or immoral actions (1989). In this context, inequalities and injustices are plainly visible, and those who enable, benefit from, or defend them do so without denial or pretense.

In the wake of this disappointing public diagnosis, let's revisit the Green Energy Transition to explore societal expectations of it.



## Expected effects of the Green Transition

We asked respondents about their expectations of the effects of the Green Transition on a range of issues important to society (but not politicians) such as poverty, inequality, the cost of energy and the quality of jobs. 63.1% expect poverty to increase a lot or significantly, and together with the 13.3% who expect no noticeable effect (which is also a negative expectation insofar as people consider poverty levels in the country to be worryingly high), negative expectations about Green Transition and poverty prevail for over  $\frac{2}{3}$  of respondents. The situation is identical for expectations about inequalities, the quality and quantity of jobs and access to energy.

The Green Transition will increase:

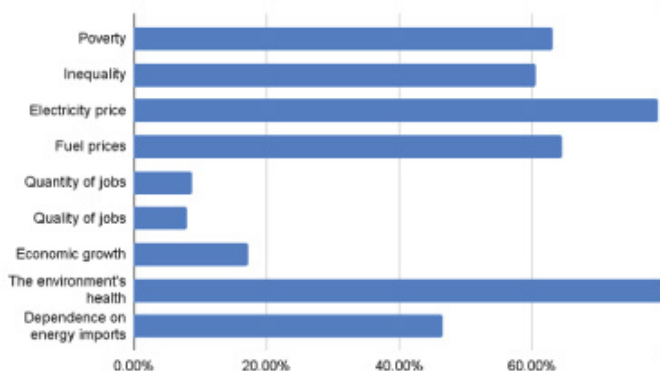


Fig. 13: Negative expectations

However, this does not mean that people reject the Green transition out of hand. The vast majority of citizens, for example, fully agree with the statement that households should be encouraged to produce green energy for themselves: nearly 90%!

Do you agree that households in Bulgaria should be encouraged to produce their own energy from renewable sources?

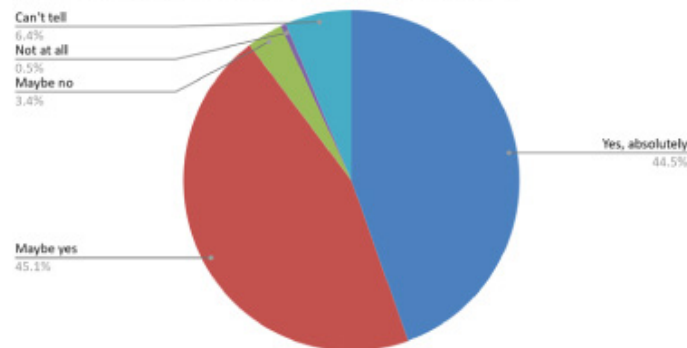


Fig. 14: Are personal renewable energy sources desirable?

We found a similar consensus with regard to energy co-operatives: this is when a residential block or neighboring houses install and run together shared renewable energy capacity such as common roof solar panels. Energy coops rake in an impressive 91.3% approval rate:

In your opinion, should energy cooperatives be established and supported?

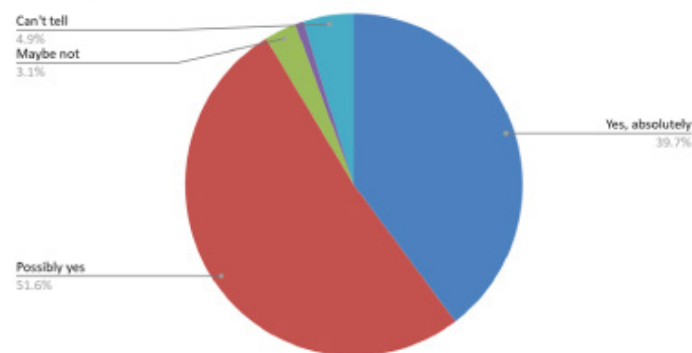


Fig. 15: Energy coops

But when it came to personal involvement, however, we encountered the already identified gap between abstract beliefs and the concrete actions of putting them into practice. For example, when we asked whether people were willing to install their own solar panels or participate in an energy cooperative, 61% and 73% respectively answered in the negative. Those firmly convinced not only in the practical benefit of owning solar panels, but also expressed a desire to put it into practice, are a negligible minority at 9.8% and 7.3%, respectively.

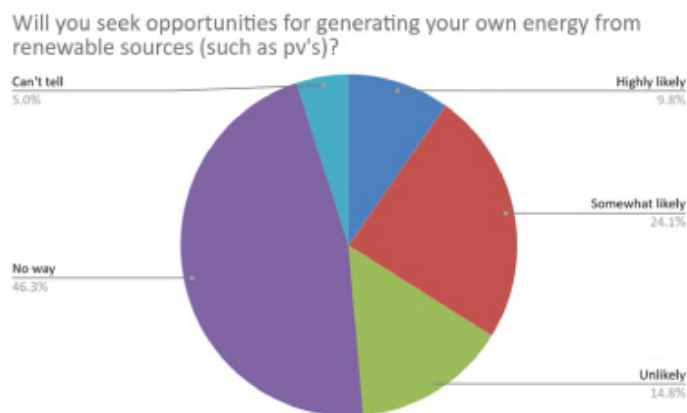


Fig. 16: No way!

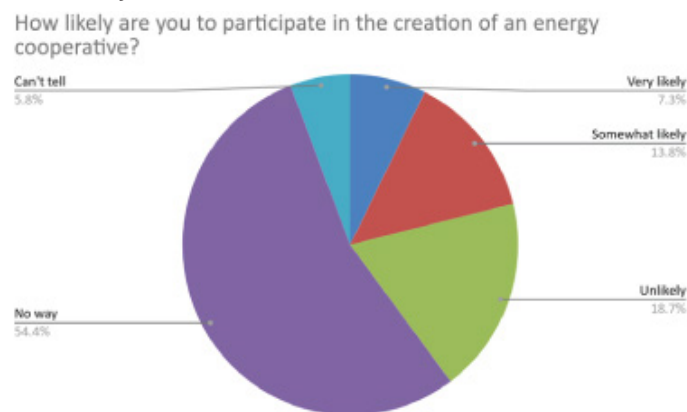


Fig. 17: No way 2!

Here an obvious scissors has opened between what people believe "in theory" to be good for them and society and "practice". The situation is reminiscent of a popular TV street poll conducted around a referendum in Bulgaria held in 2016 at the behest of a nationalist political party that sprang up from "Slavi's show": a popular political talking show (and not the first to demonstrate the existence of a media-governmental nexus in the far-right end of the political spectrum). When a reporter polled a random citizen if he voted, he responded with "I wanted to, but I didn't have desire."<sup>3</sup> One crucial thing to note is that the voter is of Roma descent and it is something of a tradition in racist Bulgarian media electoral coverage to poll Roma and then laugh at what is perceived as an uneducated or uncouth response on viral videos online. In fact, the voter became the subject of many a meme, but let me explain why the deep significance of what can be called "spontaneous Lacanianism" of the voter and his disjunction between want and desire is lost on those laughing. I deem it perfectly applicable to the survey results. While participants in our survey expressed high levels of token approval for the citizen-led energy transition, their stated intentions to participate were strikingly low. This paradox - desire without willingness - invites a psychoanalytic reading via Lacan's distinction between need and want. Need is articulated and conscious, subject to social conventions; desire, by contrast, is unconscious, shaped by lack, fantasy, and the desire for recognition by the Other. For Lacan, desire is always the desire of the Other, which is to say: we do not desire mere objects, but to be recognized as desirable by

<sup>3</sup> I was later told this punchline comes from the popular TV show "Friends". I have not been able to independently verify the alternative genealogy. The poll video can be watched here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGA\\_rKwqZ8Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGA_rKwqZ8Q)

the Other (1998: 235). In political life this translates into a desire to be noticed by the powers that be, to be included, to count and to matter. So, far

In this case, the lack of libidinal investment may reflect a deeper democratic malaise: the widespread belief that individual or collective gestures are ultimately ineffective because they are structurally overtaken by elite capture. This absence of desire should not be interpreted as apathy, but as a morbid symptom of the democracy in a society that no longer believes it can be recognised as a political factor. This libidinal withdrawal suggests that belief in the necessity of the green transition is not enough. Where recognition is rejected, desire atrophies, and symbolic approval masks a deeper despair. Similarly, Maurizio Lazarato (2009), and especially Franco Berardi, argue that neoliberalism has exhausted libidinal economics. Today, the subject is overexposed to demands but devoid of symbolic efficacy, leading to what Berardi calls “the agony of the social body”: a collective paralysis, even in the face of professed belief (2011). “We believe but do not will. We approve but cannot act.” In political science this is often referred to as the hollowing out of politics. As Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev likes to quip, elections lead to changing the politicians but not the politics.

This is no longer an ideological mystification (as in classical Marxism) but a libidinal detachment: a collapse of political desire because recognition is foreclosed. In Butler and Honneth’s theories, recognition is fundamental to action. When subjects feel they will not be noticed their desire recedes. In this light, Green transition initiatives that

are symbolically progressive but structurally captured by elites produce recognition without reciprocity. The subject affirms but cannot invest nor act.

### **What is to be done?**

Given the high levels of approval for citizens’ pv installations and a mounting consensus for the closure of polluting enterprises, it seems that people are not against the transition, but they do not believe that it will be done fairly because their desires and agenda are not reflected in those of the elites. Since the mass assessment of the fairness of the current transition is rather negative, low expectations for the coming one are both reasonable and understandable. But let us not end on an overly pessimistic note. There are still ways to save the Green Transition, at least in theory. The inquiry itself points the way to ensuring its fairness and, equally, the public legitimacy for it. In the final part of this article, I turn to some options that can help avoid a repeat of the injustices of the 1990s. The final series of questions in the survey polled public opinion on measures that can (could have been?) be taken to make the Green transition fair. For the most part, these relate to the socio-economic dimensions and costs of transition, but we started by asking whether polluting industries should be closed down. Most answers were in the affirmative, indicating that despite concerning levels of minimization of climate and environmental crises, most people realize that industries worsening air purity and damaging nature should shut down. This shows that despite the negative expectations of the Green Transition, there is still an underlying consensus that it is inevitable.

To make it fair, the Green transition must ensure:

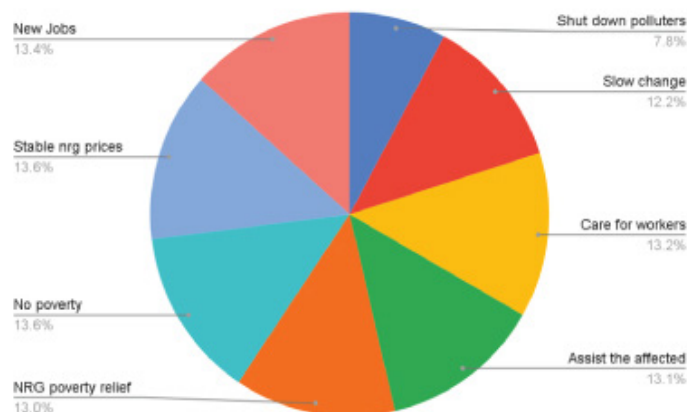


Fig. 18: Conditions for a Just energy transition 1

Conditions for Just transition continued:

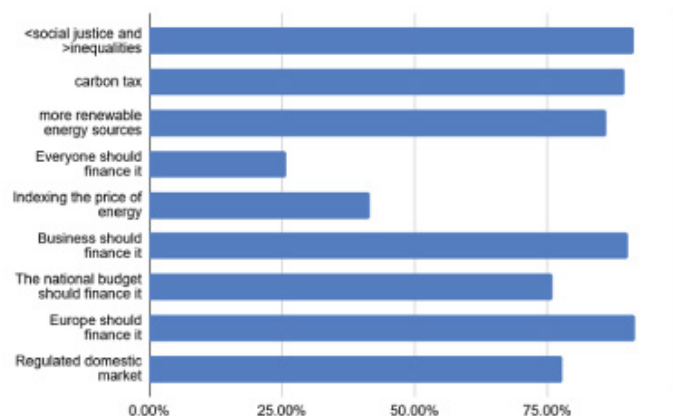


Fig. 19: Conditions for a just energy transition 2.

People want not only guarantees against poverty and energy price hikes, but also more jobs in the new Green Ener-

gy sector to make the transition just: 96.8%. Unfortunately, new energy capacity is not quite as labour intensive as conventional capacity (at least at the level of operation, if not production). While in classical fossil combustion power plants an industry standard of 1 employee per MW is still operative, the new power plants employ up to 13 times as little workers, and mostly in maintenance and installation, as opposed to the highly qualified jobs required for the old plants. We also detected expectations for a fair distribution of the cost of the transition: it is mostly the EU and the companies that will benefit from the energy transformation that are expected to pay its price, not the workers.

## Conclusion

If the Green Transition is to avoid becoming yet another iteration of the post-1989 transition, it must meet certain conditions. Based on the survey, we can distill the following conditions for the transition to be just and equitable, according to the majority of Bulgarians:

- An active state policy to protect workers and communities dependent on fossil energy;
- Active social policies that mitigate the economic shocks of transformation;
- Measures against increasing inequalities and privileges of the rich classes;
- Investment in new jobs so that people are not left without an adequate alternative;
- Measures against depopulation and the looming demographic crisis in the coal regions;
- Affordable energy for all: both through direct

transfer and price caps (electricity market regulations for household consumers);

- Development of quality jobs in new industries - with decent pay, good working conditions and long-term stability;
- Transparency by involving citizens in planning and decision-making processes to reduce the perception that transition is happening top-down and for the benefits of the elites.

The green energy transition is necessary but poses serious social and economic challenges. Our research shows that despite scepticism, people understand the need for green measures. But they are worried about poverty, inequality, electricity price hikes and job insecurity. The need for a **just transition** that does not burden the most vulnerable is self-evident.

Historically, energy transitions have not just ignored the social cost, but have been a lever to oppress workers (Malm 2016). If there are no protections for people now, the transition will lose support and legitimacy. A new social contract is needed in which the burden is shared equally.

As is evident from the survey, a scissor has opened between values and readiness for action, between expectations of the transition and the “really existing transition”. At first glance, our survey caught a positive signal: a large majority of people understand the need for environmental and climate mitigation such as reducing fossil fuel extraction/combustion or PVs. But this consensus breaks down sharply when these ideas need to be implemented. Where is this contradiction rooted? This is a classic exam-

ple of a discrepancy between stated values and practical readiness for change, and in the Bulgarian case this scissors is particularly deep. The reason is not the supposed hypocrisy of the people, but in the deep disillusionment and distrust that Bulgarian society has carried since the beginning of the Transition. After 1989 the Bulgarian society were sold on the idea of democracy and market economy believing that after a short suffering, they would catch up with the West - not only economically, but institutionally and culturally. This was the great promise of the Transition: after a period of costly sacrifices, freedom would pay off and bring prosperity, development, modernity, justice. But this promise did not come true, at least not for everyone. Economic transformation has led to deindustrialisation, mass poverty, social exclusion and insecurity, and democracy has degenerated from a system of real participation and political equality before the law, into an oligarchic rule by and in the interests of the rich. As a result, people have almost stopped voting. Meanwhile, popular trust in the democratic institutions was undermined by corruption, clientelism and nominal legality. As a result, much of society today views any idea of transition with deep scepticism. This creates a paradox: people accept the stakes of a green transition, but do not believe in the claims and abilities of the system that is supposed to implement it, that it will do so in a fair way, or that it will improve their lives. This leads to apathy and self-elimination from participation: I firmly believe in the need for energy cooperatives, but no chance I'll take initiative and participate. To paraphrase Freud, *wo Kohle war, soll Sonne werden, aber noch nicht*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Where coal was, solar shall be but not yet.

Therefore, if we want the green transition to be just and democratic, we need to address the democratic deficit enveloping it. This means concrete, visible improvements in people's daily lives such as cheap, convenient alternatives to private cars, better public transport, affordable energy, better education and healthcare, better paying jobs and more social support. We also need a fairer distribution of burdens: the transition cannot happen on the backs of the poor, in the dark, without information, without levers for participation and dialogue. If people become part of the solution, they will be more inclined to bear the inconveniences. Last but not least, we need a rethinking of the transition model itself - the green transformation cannot be carried out adequately if society has not yet metabolized its old disappointments with the old (instead these routinely get dismissed by experts as populism, socialist nostalgia, Russian propaganda, etc.). This is why the green transition in Bulgaria must also be a red or *social* one - towards a more solidary society and a social state in which sustainability is not only environmental but also social. Otherwise we will not achieve a green transition, but a deeper – if greener – inequality.

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