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SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION



This *Special Issue of Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture* is result of implementation of a project „Public Capacity for a Just Green Transition“ funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund under contract КП-06 H55/13 (period November 2021 – October 2025) by a research team at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The main objective of the project is to contribute to tackling the complex task of achieving a “just green transition”. In order to do this, we analyze what is the capacity of the society to influence the formulation and implementation of adequate pro-development policies in the field.

Climate change and environmental problems pose a serious threat not only to the present but also to future generations around the world. Europe is making efforts to mitigate the negative impact of industrial activity proposing a number of measures that have become known as the Green Transition. The main focus in this regard is on changes in the energy sector of individual countries and the need to drastically reduce carbon emissions.

This poses a number of challenges for all EU member-states, including because it relies more on available political experience than on a clear vision of the fairness of the transition, criteria for monitoring and evaluating (in) justice, as well as the lack of concrete policies and programs to achieve it. There is a need to develop policy mechanisms and policy instruments such as adequate decision-making, criteria for assessing the fairness of the transition and procedures for using these criteria. Without effective policy instruments, the practical achievement of a just green transition will hardly be possible.

The articles in this special issue of the journal focus on characteristics of Bulgarian society that demonstrate its capacity to create and implement just and pro-development policies. Using the example of changes related to the green transition, the authors identify significant deficits in terms of essential elements of societal capacity.

The first article examines the public capacity concept as the ability of society to achieve, facilitate or block the achievement of certain, declared as significant societal goals. The empirical results and analysis establish widespread views based on shared values of justice and assessments of realities

along the justice-injustice axis. These values determine the expectations and concerns about the possibility of a just green transition in the country. In this respect, Bulgarian society is much more homogenized and integrated than the deliberate fragmentation policies suggest.

The second article focuses on public awareness and the ability to use information and knowledge to solve public problems as an essential element necessary for the formation, maintenance and activation of public capacity. The analyze reveals major weaknesses in individual awareness, communication environment and civic participation in Bulgaria, raising the possibility of making political decisions that are far from social fairness.

The third article focuses on expert pronouncements about the ongoing Green Transition (GT) in the Bulgarian energy sector and indicates that decarbonization emerges as a new frontier of capital accumulation, sidelining problems of justice—both climatic and social.

The forth article discusses on a project basis opportunities to stimulate civic participation, support the empowerment of vulnerable people and communities, and increase solidarity on issues and problems related to energy poverty and a just energy transition.

The fifth article summarizes the main mechanisms that undermine public capacity and allow the conquest of the state by small groups whose interests are at odds with social justice. Such tools are conquering accountability and control institutions, such as the judiciary, audit institutions, civil society, and media; but also, erosion of education, values and production of distorted, partial, politicized knowledge.

The analyses show that there are a number of obstacles to the implementation of a just green transition in Bulgaria. However, the study also identifies some positive aspects (such as the resurgent interest in justice among society and researchers; rising civil discontent) that give reason to believe that contemporary societies will find the incentives and unifying values necessary to maintain the capacity to uphold justice.

More information about research results within the project and future publications can be found online at project website: <https://zelenprehod>.



blogspot.com/p/home.html and the website of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences - <https://ips-bas.org/>.

PUBLIC CAPACITY FOR A JUST GREEN TRANSITION. THE COLLISION: JUSTICE – SOCIAL REALITIES

Maria Jeliazkova

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Abstract: The article discusses the concept of public capacity. It presents results regarding: what are the attitudes, values and beliefs regarding justice in Bulgarian society; what are the assessments of the current state along the justice - injustice axis; what are the expectations in this direction related to the green transition; what, according to popular attitudes, are the conditions for the green transition to be just. It concludes that as far as visions on just green transition are concerned, Bulgarian society is more homogenized, at least for now, than the various basic individual differentiations, socio-economic processes, and policies aimed at deliberate fragmentation of society suggest.

Key words: public capacity, pro-social values, substantive and procedural justice, a fair society, just green transition

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Introduction

The project “Public Capacity for a Just Green Transition” is being implemented in the period November 2021-October 2025. During this period, serious transformations occurred in the significance, attitude, and attention to the green transition. Following various social and political processes, the so-called “green transition” is also associated with an intensive reformatting of goals at different levels, opposition of new against established

tasks, tendencies towards concentration of decision-making processes, including through convenient crisisifications. In general, it can be said that this affects both public attitudes and analytical focuses.

Within the project, we used traditional and well-established sociological research tools: literature review and desk research; representative sociological survey for Bulgaria; focus groups; in-depth interviews; citizen panels; as well as comparisons with results from other published empirical studies.

As can be seen in the title, the project attempts to analyze three basic concepts and the connections and interactions between them: public capacity, green transition, just transition. This raises a series of scientific questions, e.g. whether we focus on public capacity and its importance for implementing social changes, including, for example, a just green transition; or whether the main emphasis is on the green transition and different public attitudes towards it, as well as its possible fairness. In the course of implementation and analytical broadening of focus, including through revision and heated discussions, we attempt to consider the state and connections in the relationships between the three concepts in a balanced manner.

In this regard, it is important to clarify the concept of public capacity. Whose capacity are we actually talking about: the state capacity; the capacity of relatively small but active communities and groups; the society as a whole?

Aspects of public capacity

We started from the idea of understanding public capacity as state capacity, as policies and practical actions for implementing a green transition. In fact, if we open even now, the widely accessible, informative and systematizing dominant views overview of Artificial Intelligence, we will read that "Public capacity refers to the ability and resources of a government to effectively implement policies, provide public services and promote the social development of its citizens."¹

However, during the course of the project, we encountered a problem: state capacity poorly and increasingly poorly reflects developments in society, public attitudes and views; research in this direction is increasing, es-

¹ Public capacity - AI Overview, accessed on 17.09.2025



tablishing clear and deepening faults. Among the vast number of examples available, I will only highlight one very recent one. A report by the European Environmental Bureau² analyzing European policies, tellingly contains in its title the slang youth English term for obsessions and delusions – The State of *Delulu*. State capacity has its essential aspects, elements and characteristics, but it does not represent public capacity.

In search of a different conceptual framework for public capacity, many studies find that NGOs and various communities (local, professional, interest-based, etc.) are usually analyzed, as well as different forms of expertise.³ These are, of course, important aspects of public capacity that we explore, but they do not exhaust it. Moreover, different stakeholders, civil society organizations, NGOs, and communities often engage in mutual and internal wars with each other, following their own values. These wars, like all wars, also represent hardened and entrenched monologues within their own groups and with basic results: strengthening internal and external borders and blocking any opportunities for dialogue. From this perspective, such an approach to public capacity is narrow and insufficiently analytically justified. Therefore, we sought a broader conceptual approach.

At the same time, it is not difficult to prove that society is a neglected actor, despite the fact that democracy is a system of supposed majority rule. Over a long period, a set of conceptual paradigms, mainstream social sciences, powerful political players (e.g., M. Thatcher), generally speaking, the neoliberal agenda managed to establish an approach towards individualization, fragmentation and neglect of society. Recently, and due to new developments, various concepts and studies⁴ have attempted to return a

² European Environmental Bureau (2025). The network brings together environmental citizen groups and organizations, headquartered in Brussels, , The State of Delulu. <https://eeb.org/?s=The+State+of+Delulu>

³ Erika Weinthal and Yael Parag, "Two Steps Forward, One Step Backward: Societal Capacity and Israel's Implementation of the Barcelona Convention and the Mediterranean Action Plan." *Global Environmental Politics*, Vol. 3, № 1 (2003), 51–71; Sandra Kröger, *Nothing but Consultation: The Place of Organised Civil Society in EU Policy-Making across Policies*. European Governance Papers (EUROGOV) No. C-08-03, 2008 <http://www.connex-network.org/eurogov/pdf/egp-connex-C-08-03.pdf>; Grace Pollard, Jessica Studdert and Luca Tiratelli, *Community Power: The Evidence*. New Local, 2021, <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Community-Power-The-Evidence.pdf>

⁴ Roberto S. Foa, "Why Strongmen Win in Weak States", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 32, № 1 (2021), 52–65; Paul Lichterman, "Social Capacity and the Styles of Group Life: Some Inconvenient Wellsprings of Democracy", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 52, № 6 (2009), 846–866.

more adequate centering of focus, filling a serious and deep gap, at least in social analyzes.

We view public, societal capacity as the ability of society to achieve, facilitate, or block the achievement of certain, declared as significant, societal goals. It is known that the transformation of individuals into a community and society requires the so-called “glue”⁵, which is based on similar assessments of social realities based on shared moral values and an identity formed on their basis; opportunities to formulate common demands based on this value rationality; support, challenge or condemnation of actions (including policies) that do not correspond to shared values. There is little doubt that social upsurge is much more likely when there are lines of synchronization between widely held societal judgments and values and policies and practical actions adapted to them.

Essentially, it is about evolutionarily established pro-social values, directing the behavior of individuals towards socially beneficial models, towards pro-developmental models of interactions in societies and groups. A clear example of such a group of fundamental values are those mentioned by Habermas⁶: justice, equality, fairness, reciprocity. In fact, these are evolutionarily embedded values that can be found far back in human history, for example in the wisdom of the five pro-social elements of the Ten Commandments.

Within the project we are trying to establish: what are the attitudes, values and beliefs regarding justice in Bulgarian society; what are the assessments of the current state along the justice - injustice axis; what are the expectations in this regard related to the green transition; what, according to popular attitudes, are the conditions for the green transition to be just.

Therefore, and based on a broad review of various analyzes, studies, data, indicators and research tools, we formulated empirical indicators, drawing lessons and preserving opportunities for comparisons with other available results.⁷

⁵ Nat Colletta, Teck Ghee Lim, and Anita Kelles-Viitanen, *Social Cohesion and Conflict Prevention in Asia: Managing Diversity through Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2001, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/457204?ln=en>.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms. Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996).

⁷ Nils Springhorn, “On the measurement of need-based justice. *Economics and Philosophy*”, vol. 38, № 3 (2022), 466-500; Bernhard Kittel, “Need-Based Justice: A Sociological Perspective,” in *Need-Based Distributive Justice*, ed. by Stefan Traub and Bernhard Kittel (Cham: Springer, 2020); Jeffrey R. Yumang, *Environmental awareness and attitude of senior high students: basis for environmental enrichment cur-*



The returning focus on justice

It is not difficult to notice that in all possible social areas and spheres, the number and intensity of research related to distributive justice is growing, as is attention to the growing gap between the moral and the legal. As Piketty⁸ points out, if the ongoing trend towards concentration of capital continues, it could reach a level that is potentially incompatible with the democratic values and principles of social justice that are fundamental to modern democratic societies. It can also be assumed that in periods and contexts of intense accumulation of injustices, attention intensifies. As A. Sen points out, “What moves us, quite sensibly, is not the realization that the world is not perfectly fair – which few of us expect – but that there are clearly remediable injustices around us that we want to eliminate.”⁹

There is also a growing search for empirical and conceptual connections between social justice on the one hand and social development, solidarity, social cohesion, social progress, social quality, the failures of nations, social fractures, etc. on the other.

Australian scientists (Scanlon Institute¹⁰) have been monitoring annually, since 2007, according to the Scanlon-Monash Index, the state of social cohesion in their country through five main areas and the relationships between them: sense of belonging, shared values and trust; life satisfaction, happiness and expectations; social justice and social inclusion; civic participation and acceptance and rejection of others. The 2023 report¹¹ tracks trends and the general conclusion is that social cohesion is under pressure and declining. Although social cohesion decreased in each of the five domains examined, the researchers recorded the largest decrease and the greatest significance for the overall decrease in social cohesion in justice ratings. Their findings depict that demographic and socioeconomic char-

riculum, 2018, <https://www.scribd.com/document/665761164/environmentalAwarenessAttitude-J-Yu-mang>.

⁸ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 34.

⁹ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), VII.

¹⁰ Scanlon Institute, <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/research/scanlon-monash-index>

¹¹ James O'Donnell, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2023* (Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2023), <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/publications/mapping-social-cohesion-report/2023-mapping-social-cohesion-report>.

acteristics such as age, education, financial situation, immigration status, housing and living situations cannot explain the results, that there is an overall feeling that justice is under threat. In addition, the authors note that young people have lower trust and are more pessimistic.

In his book "The Fair Society: The Science of Human Nature and the Pursuit of Social Justice" Corning¹², views the sense of justice as a distinctively evolved human and societal characteristic and as based on three biologically based principles: equality, equity and reciprocity.

By *equality*, Corning understands the necessity of satisfying basic needs for survival and reproduction as an equal social right, which he calls the "fundamental directive". These are basic needs that are similar for all people. And the need to guarantee them, according to him, represents a basis, a lower limit, at which everyone is approximately equal or equally deprived if any of their basic needs is not met. Equality in meeting basic needs, according to Corning, is directly related to the right to life, which otherwise loses meaning.

The second principle discussed by Corning is that of *equity* - a fair distribution of economic surpluses (beyond what is necessary to provide for basic needs) and is directly related to merit, talent, hard work, achievements, etc. meritocratic principles. "Distributive justice" takes into account proportionality between rewards and contributions embedded in cultural norms and practices – such as socially acceptable unequal distribution and inequality.

The third principle is that of *reciprocity*, which refers to cooperation, collaboration and trust, fair exchange of goods and services, rights and obligations, etc. The norm of reciprocity, like that of equality, must be socially acceptable, recognized and consistently enforced.

According to Corning, a society that does not achieve an adequate balance between the three indispensable principles of justice is a "society in danger".

¹² Peter Corning, *The Fair Society: The Science of Human Nature and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).



The idea of justice in Bulgarian society and assessments of the current state

Within the framework of the project, we tried to establish what is understood by justice in Bulgaria, whether there are widely shared assessments, both in terms of essential, substantive justice and procedural justice. How do these views relate to possible developments and different scenarios related to the green transition – positive, neutral, related to concerns and threats, etc.

Therefore, the search for empirical results is oriented towards the idea of justice and the extent to which there are common, widely shared judgments about the progress of the green transition in Bulgaria; how these judgments are embedded in various declared goals and outline different options for action; to what extent political practices are sensitive to the value models in Bulgarian society and provide space for favorable impacts on policies by society; what are the value orientations in Bulgarian society in a comparative perspective in relation to other European countries.

The representative sociological survey conducted in 2023, as well as the citizen panels in 2025, revealed the existence of widely shared ideas in our country about what justice means and what its different dimensions are. These ideas are in line with the consideration of justice through the prism of equality, equity, fairness, and reciprocity, mentioned earlier.

The specific results of the study show a clear clustering of mass value attitudes in certain positions, more precisely:

Value views: What does a fair society mean?	Share (%) – completely agree and somewhat agree
It is fair if those who work more earn more.	97.8
A society is fair if it takes care of the poor and the needy.	96.8

A society is fair if all people have enough food, shelter, clothing, and access to education and medical care.	96.6
It is fair if each person receives only what he has acquired through his own efforts.	84.0
A society is fair if it does not allow excessive income disparities.	75.2
It is fair if income and wealth are relatively evenly distributed among the members of our society.	73.3

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

Thus, the common, shared by large majorities, notion of justice among Bulgarian citizens includes simultaneously demands for recognition of merit and efforts, care for those in need, provision of basic needs for all, and control over inequalities.

The results demonstrate that widely internalized constellations of meaning complexes regarding justice and related values are prevalent among a very large portion of the population. They are shared by distinct majorities among all age groups, people with different incomes, education, and employment status, and are not differentiated by gender.

Various studies and researchers have recently highlighted the existence of generational changes. For example, the American political scientist, member of the World Values Survey team, Pippa Norris³³ argues that “age is the new divide in politics” and the values of the young and the elderly are very different.

That is why we examined in more detail the extent to which age differences affect the mental complexes regarding justice in our country. In this regard, it is important to first point out that our study does not register clear correlations between the age of respondents and preferred answers.

³³ 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), 178-179.



The most common assessments of the youngest in the study (18-29 years old) repeat the most common assessments among the entire population studied. Moreover, the inspection also shows that most often the most common ratings among the youngest (forming a clear majority among their ratings) are the same as the most common ratings among the oldest (forming a majority of their ratings).

Thus, our results do not support the idea of opposing values depending on age. Regarding the idea of justice, the research did not register a significant age aspect of value conflict or tensions.

There are some differences: e.g. adults are more categorical – more often choosing the answers 'strongly agree' or 'strongly disagree', while young people are more moderate choosing 'rather agree' or 'rather disagree'; in terms of self-perception of competence, there are differences in the understanding of personal competence – on some questions, more older people choose 'I can't decide', the questions in which young people choose this answer more often are different; the scale of high majorities is different – for the youngest they are over 70%, for the oldest and the entire group they are around and over 90%.

The general conclusion is that our results do not support the stated idea of opposing values depending on age and the emergence of a "new division in politics". Despite some nuances that could be further explored, there are clearly similar and shared notions regarding justice that constitute an important basis for societal capacity.

All of this also relates to the general assessment of Bulgarian society about the state of affairs along the justice - injustice axis. This assessment is too unfavorable. On a ten-point scale with extreme answers "there is no justice at all - there is a high degree of justice", the cluster is in the top five positions - 85.6%.

Positive responses reporting the presence of justice totaled 9.9%, with the answer "there is a high degree of justice" and the closest response each shared by 0.2% of respondents.

Regarding the issue of age discussed above, the situation is the same here. The correlation coefficient by age is low. The share of the youngest indicat-

ing the top five positions among all young people surveyed is 77.7%; the share of the oldest indicating the top five positions among all the oldest people surveyed is 88.3%;

Analyzing the results of our survey, we went back and compared them with the results for Bulgaria from the European Values Survey. Our results largely coincide with those published in the Atlas of European Values.¹⁴

According to the aforementioned publication, the European Values Survey finds that Bulgaria is characterized by the highest share of citizens focused on survival; the lowest share of people who indicate that they are happy; the lowest average score in terms of life satisfaction; the lowest share of people who believe they have control over their lives; a strong emphasis on work, pay, and basic needs at the expense of attention to leisure, personal development, and self-realization; very low trust in public institutions; and high dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in our country. Behind these opinions, albeit with varying clarity, judgments are visible through the prism of values - notions of justice, equality, fairness, reciprocity.

It is important to note that, according to many of the indicators considered, the registered unfavorable situation in our country is far from the situation in other EU member states, according to some of them, far from Europe at all, and according to some of them - even from the countries presented for comparison outside Europe. In some aspects, the direction over the years is also clearly different from that in other EU member states.

Thus, the general conclusions from both studies point to a conclusion about Bulgarian society as a society "on the border" and a "society in danger" (in Corning's understanding).

What are the conditions for a green transition to be just?

Related to this are the views of Bulgarians on what needs to be monitored, controlled and taken into account in order for a truly just green transition to take place. The results show that the green transition cannot be just by chance or by some inertia. There are a number of conditions that must be

¹⁴ Halman et al., "Atlas of European Values"



met so that the mention of a just green transition is not mere propaganda and manipulation.

These conditions are largely similar and duplicate the above-mentioned views of justice:

	Share /%/ of responses – completely agree and rather agree.
What are the conditions for a green transition to be just?	
Poverty should not be allowed to increase.	98.8
The price of energy should not increase.	98.4
New job positions should be open.	96.8
It should be ensured that the workers from closing factories are retrained and provided with well-paid work.	95.6
All those affected by negative changes should be assisted	94.6
The energy poor should be supported	94.4
Financing for the green transition should be provided by European funds for countries with a lower than average standard of living.	91.6
There should be more socio-economic justice and lower inequalities.	91.3
The financing of the green transition should come from businesses that make profits from the green transition.	90.3

Fossil fuel companies should pay a carbon tax.	89.6
The green transition should be gradual and cautious.	88.6
Permits for renewable energy projects should be issued fast.	86.6
The green transition should be financed from the national budget.	76
Harmful industries that pollute the air should be quickly closed.	56.8

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

The issues that gather majorities of dissenters (fully or rather) are:

- The price of energy for households should not be regulated – 78% disagree. Energy price liberalization is seen by the majority of respondents as a threat to welfare. Existing arguments that this will lead to fair pay fail to convince citizens. Among the likely reasons for this are the objective facts that liberalizations in many different sectors during the long transition not only did not strengthen justice, but significantly strengthened assessments of injustice;
- Everyone should participate in financing the green transition – 63.7% disagree. The preferred rules for financing this transition have to do with the idea of “pay according to merit.” It is based on the view that the cost should be borne primarily by those who profit and those who pollute; as well as by those who formulate the goals, without adequate regard to the problems of the well-being of Bulgarian citizens;
- While the question of whether the price of energy should be indexed to the consumption level of each household does not gather a majority in either direction: Agree – 41.5%; Disagree – 49.2%. It can be assumed that among the likely reasons for these preferences are the uncertainty regarding the adequate determination of the level of consumption of different households and the generators behind it.

Thus, in summary, the widely shared conditions for a green transition to be just include requirements for public engagement with welfare issues,



support for the affected and the energy poor, control over inequalities, and a fair determination of who pays.

At the same time, these conditions are the result of the way in which the main problems of Bulgarian society are considered and the assumptions about what would happen if a green transition were to take place without monitoring and controlling these conditions.

The results of the study show that the main problems of people in Bulgaria are identified as problems related to basic needs: low income, inflation, state of healthcare, access to cheap energy, state of education, unemployment. All of these problems were identified as major by over 90% of respondents.

Therefore, even if there are no clear rules for implementing a green transition with special commitments to justice, the expectations are that it will exacerbate already existing problems: the price of electricity and fuels, poverty and inequalities. The widespread favorable expectation - improving the cleanliness of nature and air - is not enough against the background of the dominant unfavorable expectations.

These survey results demonstrate the views of Bulgarian citizens regarding substantive justice, essential justice as a result of the ongoing political and socio-economic processes that distort the distribution of resources, opportunities, benefits and harms. Along with this, another type of justice is also important - procedural justice, related to rules and procedures in decision-making.

Procedural justice

The ways in which decisions are taken, the opportunities for participation of different stakeholders, and the transparent argumentation of positions are important characteristics of perceptions of justice. "Research on distributive justice has focused on the question of how people judge the fairness of the outcomes of social exchanges. In the 1970s, it became apparent to many social scientists that people were concerned not only with the outcomes of social exchanges but also with the fairness of the procedures by which distributional decisions were made. Thus, the concept of procedural

justice was born.”¹⁵ Procedural justice affects almost every distributional decision and is a pervasive and influential issue.¹⁶

Within the project, we also studied the requirements for decision-making processes related to the green transition. The answers to the questions related to procedural justice paint the following picture:

92.8% of respondents believe that society should be informed about decisions and be convinced that they are in everyone's interest.

89.6% believe that decisions in the energy sector should be made by experts.

69.6% expect people to have real opportunities to participate in decision-making.

It is important to note that these views are not recommendations arranged side by side in logic, either by experts or by citizens. These requirements are a knot that requires both expertise, awareness and conviction that they are in the interest of everyone, as well as opportunities for participation.

The study found a very strong correlation between the requirement for expertise and public reasoning of decisions ($r = 0.83462$), as well as between the requirement for public reasoning of decisions and opportunities for participation ($r = 0.704695$).

The three together constitute a strategy that protects against the promotion of private interests against common interests. The high technocratic preferences in our country, also registered in the European Values Survey, on the one hand represent an attempt to protect against arbitrary and inadequate political actions, but, on the other hand, require responsible and publicly controlled experts who are both based on expert knowledge and, at the same time, able to argue for decisions in the common interest.

¹⁵ D. Ramona Bobocel and Leanne Gosse, "Procedural justice: A historical review and critical analysis", in *The Oxford handbook of justice in the workplace*, ed. by Russell S. Cropanzano and Maureen L. Ambrose, (Oxford University Press, 2015), 51–87.

¹⁶ E. Allan Lind and Tom R. Tyler, *The Social Psychology of Procedural Justice*, Critical Issues in Social Justice Series (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 1988).



These requirements are against the backdrop of a high share of respondents who believe that lobbying interests now determine decisions in the energy sector – 74.9% and that the process is not open and transparent – 76%.

Similar to what was stated above regarding fairness, the assessment of transparency in energy decision-making is concentrated in the top five unfavorable positions – 69.9%, with a strong linear relationship with responses about the presence of injustice ($r = 0.681679$).

In terms of values, there is a synchrony between the assessments of the unfairness of the processes and the opacity of the decisions; the presence of simultaneous and serious problems with regard to justice and democracy in Bulgarian society has been registered.

Conclusion

Our research finds widespread negative assessments of both existing substantive and procedural justice. Negative assessments regarding the results (substantive justice) as well as negative assessments regarding the methods of decision-making (procedural justice) in Bulgarian society are in sync with each other.

The widely assessed negative consequences for society together with inadequate procedural rules mutually intensify their significance, significantly limiting the possibilities for improvements and reasonable social changes. Barriers to citizens influencing decisions and narrowing impact to certain closed groups increases the opportunities for them to strengthen rules and mechanisms in their own favor and against the common interest. The combination of high levels of substantive and procedural injustice leads to an alienated and paralyzed society.

At the same time, there is an important characteristic of public capacity – widely shared value views regarding justice and its basic aspects. This moral compass is in tune with universal and evolutionarily anchored basic pro-social human values. This moral compass is consistent and internally homogeneous, based on balances between equality, equity, and reciprocity. There are value models regarding identity, well-being, solidarity and de-

mocracy, shared by broad majorities of Bulgarian citizens and in this sense, they are established, consistent and stabilized.

This value model could act as a basis for homogenization and social cohesion in the Bulgarian society, which is highly fragmented in terms of objective indicators. In any case, the lack of differentiation by the usual socio-demographic characteristics (gender, generation, education, income, etc.) in the established moral compass is an important conclusion from the study. This conclusion confronts both the often-discussed partial value fragmentations and the often-stated claim that Bulgarian society has no common goal. The shared idea of justice and its empowerment could, in principle, play such a role.

But, instead and in connection with the green transition, established and ongoing policies and political actions continue to intensely fragment Bulgarian society, through:

- Fragmentation of well-being: While citizens holistically view their well-being and quality of life as simultaneously encompassing social, economic, and environmental characteristics, *social versus green* conflicts are growing, including through attempts to deliberately construct impossible choices for people between food, medicine, heat, and clean air.
- Fragmentation of ecological responses: *green against green* by placing fins and solar panels on fertile lands, while food quality and access to water become an increasing problem.
- Fragmentation of citizenship through attempts to turn citizens into *consumers and customers*. To reclaim the political terrain for citizens, as A. Sen says, thoughtful strategies are needed to strengthen participation in decision-making processes.
- Fragmentation of senses and meanings by directing *some goals against other goals*, without explanations and in the aforementioned delulu perspective. This reinforces the view that the green transition is not so much about a clean environment as about profits and further increasing inequalities.¹⁷

¹⁷ Lavinia Steinfert and James Angel, *Energy Transition Mythbusters*, Transnational Institute (TNI) & TradeUnions for Energy Democracy (TUED), 2023, <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/energy-transition-mythbusters>



Nevertheless, it can be argued that ideas of justice as a product of socializing influences, universal evolutionarily anchored basic pro-social values, changing socio-economic and political contexts, and quality of life can have a protective function for highly fragmented societies and outline community. The established connecting meaning components may also contain possibilities for collective action, at least as a latent possibility.

In any case, in terms of basic pro-social values, Bulgarian society is more homogenized, at least for now, than the various basic individual differentiations, socio-economic processes, and policies aimed at deliberate fragmentation of society suggest.

Acknowledgment:

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

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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

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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. Based on education, criticism and reflexivity 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.

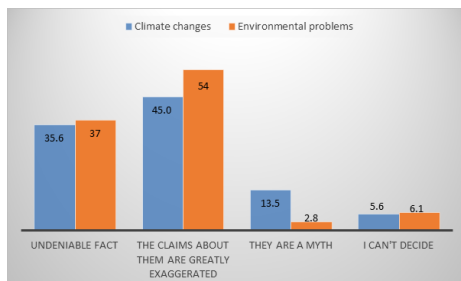
2. Individual Awareness

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).

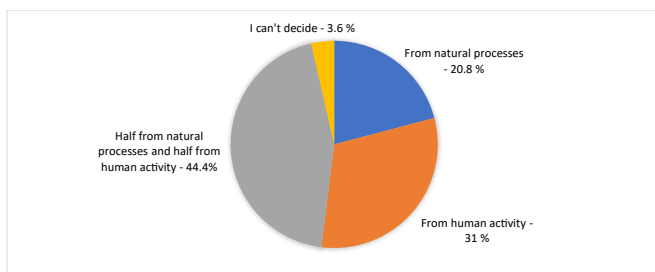
Figure 1: Opinion on climate change and environmental pollution (%)



Source: National Representative Survey carried out within the framework of the KΠ-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? (%)



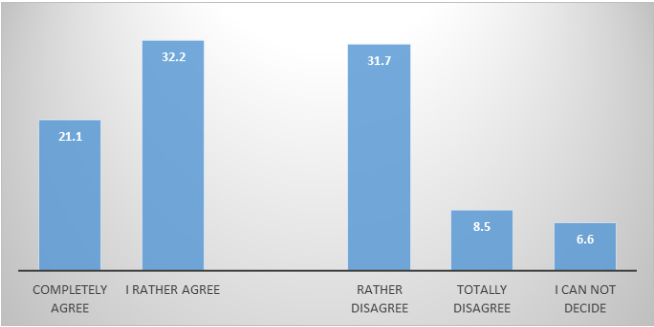
Source: National representative survey carried out within the framework of KΠ-06- H55/13 project

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 (%)



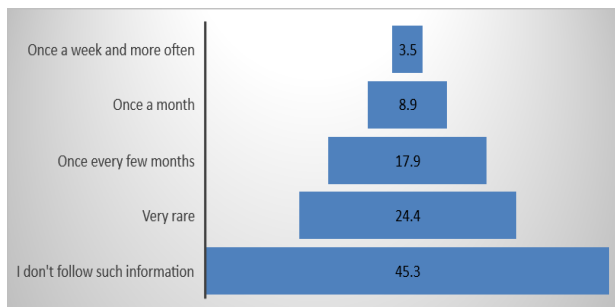
Source: National representative survey carried out within the framework of КП-06-H55/13 project

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).

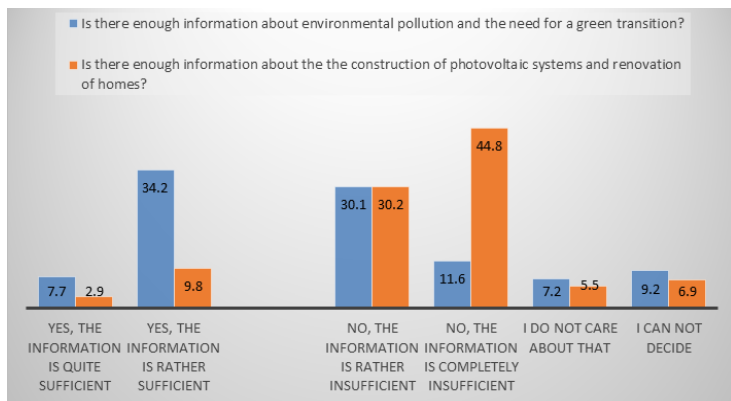
Partial information is presented in the public space. This is seen, for example, in the manner in which Bulgarian politicians (do not) share information



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).

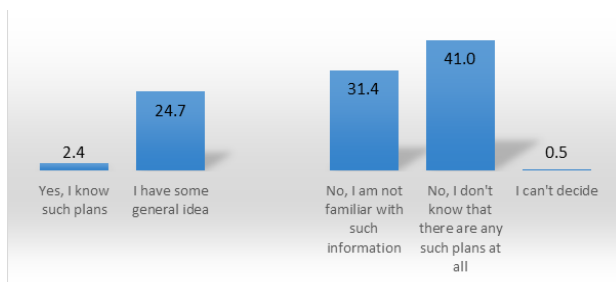
The lack of institutional support and mechanisms created by the local and central authorities through which people seeking information may be directed is clearly visible.

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).



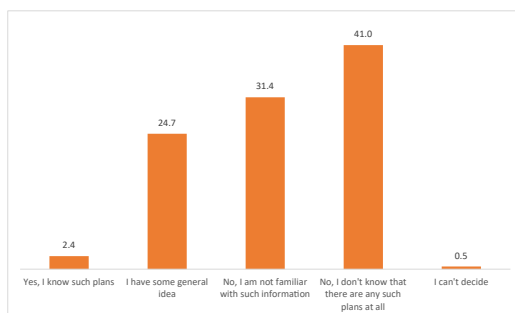
Figure 6: Do you have information about the developed territorial fair transition plans in the coal mining regions? (%)



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

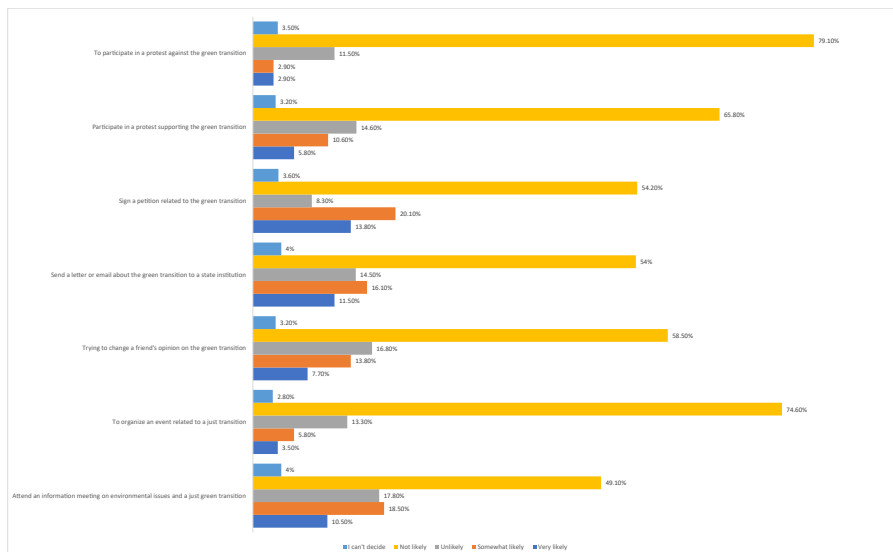
As regards Bulgaria, data from the European Values Study shows that the country has one of the lowest levels of willingness to participate or actual participation in various forms of political activities, such as demonstrations, petitions, boycotts, strikes¹⁶. Our survey shows continuation of the trend 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-

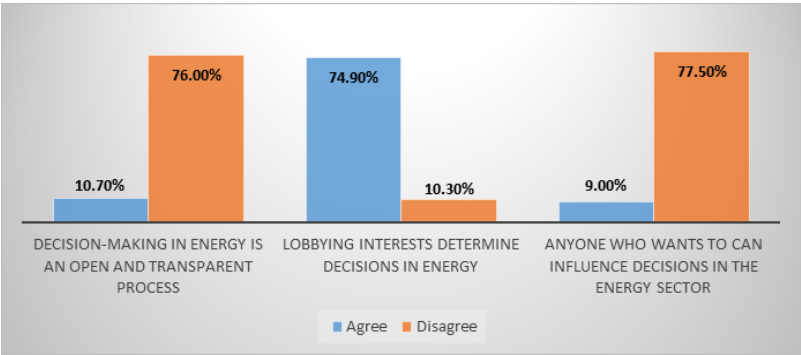
izens' position.

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-H55/13 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-kyustendil-sreshu-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>.

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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_zha_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 Biliانا 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 *Zeleanata 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.

SOCIAL INTERVENTION FOR ENERGY SOLIDARITY: THE WISE PROJECT IN BULGARIA

Milena Stateva



Abstract: The article will present the Bulgarian component of the *WISE – Women in Solidarity for Energy* project as a social intervention for community building and feminist democratic learning, rather than a technical or policy-only initiative. It will argue that WISE functions as an embryonic infrastructure for collective care and civic imagination—a prototype of a *pan-European movement for energy justice* that transforms the very notion of “solidarity” from charity into mutual empowerment and political participation. Drawing on *practice-based reflection, feminist theory, and social movement studies*, the article will locate WISE Bulgaria as a living laboratory of how communities of care can emerge around material issues like energy poverty. It will link this to contemporary crises—ecological, democratic, and epistemic—and explore how feminist facilitation, storytelling, and social pedagogy turn “energy” from a technical problem into a social commons.

Key words: energy poverty, vulnerability and solidarity; feminist action research

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Introduction: energy as a site of social imagination

Energy is rarely discussed in relational terms despite, or probably because, its key role in the Just Green Transition frameworks. It appears instead as a matter of infrastructure, finance, or climate targets - measured in kilowatt-hours rather than care. Yet behind every policy target or efficiency index lies a more fragile and intimate reality: people struggling to stay warm (or cool in the summer), to cook, to care, to have sufficient light for homeworks with their kids. To exist with dignity. Across the continent, 8–10% of households are affected by energy poverty¹ or at least vulnerability²; among single women the rate surges to 31%, and among single mothers to 44%³. These are not abstract figures - they describe an entire social field in which gender, class, and infrastructure intertwine to produce both material deprivation and civic invisibility or hidden struggles.

The *Women in Solidarity for Energy (WISE)* project emerged precisely within this field of invisibility. Funded under the European Union's *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV)* programme in the period 2024-2026, and implemented across seven EU countries, and co-funded in Bulgaria from the European Climate Foundation, it set out to make the energy transition more just, participatory, and gender-aware. Yet in the process of implementation, WISE became more than an awareness campaign. It unfolded as a *social intervention*, or is at least intended to be - in so far as we are at the threshold in Bulgaria of precisely moving into the stages of direct engagement of groups and individuals to build a laboratory of collective learning, feminist facilitation, and civic imagination. Under the leadership of the Orion Grid, the project in Bulgaria seeks not only to address the symptoms of energy poverty, but to reconfigure the very social relations through which energy, care, and at the end of the day democracy are lived.

¹ Defined as "energy bills being an excessive share of income (e.g. >10%) and inability to maintain thermal comfort (winter or summer)". The definition of energy poverty employed by the project is not limited to the poorest households as in the official definition for policy purposes and budgets adopted in Bulgaria for the purposes of the Green Deal.

² Which we define "as being 1-2 months away from not being able to pay energy bills if regular income is lost".

³ Eurofound (2022), *The cost-of-living crisis and energy poverty in the EU: Social impact and policy responses – Background paper*, Eurofound, Dublin. Available online at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2022/cost-living-crisis-and-energy-poverty-eu-social-impact-and-policy-responses> (l.a. October 2025).

This article proposes to read WISE Bulgaria as a form of *applied social intervention* - a participatory process through which communities, institutions, and individuals co-create meaning and solidarity around a shared material crisis. The project's approach resonates with the claim made by Sarah Stein Lubrano that "the apocalypse isn't something you survive alone": survival, like transition, is always collective⁴. Through film screenings, storytelling workshops, multilingual translation events, and energy solidarity days, WISE enacted a pedagogy of connection. It invited women - often isolated, marginalised, or silenced - to appear as experts of their own experience and as political subjects in a broader European conversation about justice, energy, and belonging.

At stake in this article is not only an account of what the project achieved, but an exploration of what it *reveals* about the possibilities of social change in an age of intersecting crises. By reframing energy solidarity as both a feminist and civic practice, WISE Bulgaria challenges technocratic understandings of transition and reclaims the everyday as a site of resistance and re-imagination. Its gatherings - whether called "Party Against Apathy," the National Collective meetings, or the "28 Days of Language Solidarity" - operate as rituals of repair: spaces where knowledge, emotion, and action can recombine into what we might call *social energy*.

Seen in this light, WISE is not simply a project; it is a prototype of a movement still coming into being - a networked form of *European social imagination* that builds community power around the most elemental of needs: warmth, care, and voice.

So far, the Bulgarian phase of WISE has primarily focused on *intervening in the social environment* - mapping the landscape of energy injustice, convening diverse stakeholders, and cultivating a new language of solidarity that could hold together activists, policymakers, NGOs, possibly companies and first of all - ordinary citizens. Through these early interventions, the project has built the social infrastructure for what comes next. As it now enters its second half, WISE is poised to shift from analysis and awareness toward direct engagement with women in situations of energy poverty and

⁴ Sarah Stein Lubrano, "The Apocalypse Isn't Something You Survive Alone," *Substack*, July 11, 2025, <https://sarahsteinlubrano.substack.com/p/the-apocalypse-isnt-something-you> (l.a. October, 2025).

vulnerability. This next stage will link these women to volunteers offering practical support - such as energy-saving home improvements and literacy in managing bills - while also creating spaces for them to develop skills in self-organisation, storytelling, and collective advocacy.

In this sense, WISE Bulgaria moves from the *symbolic to the tangible*, from raising consciousness to redistributing capacity. The forthcoming activities aim hyper-ambitiously to transform the solidarity networks already seeded in earlier phases into living systems of mutual aid and participatory governance. By enabling as much as actually possible within the material conditions surrounding the project women to articulate their experiences publicly and to take part in bottom-up policy processes, the project aspires not merely to speak about vulnerability but to generate power from within it. This transition - from intervention in the environment to transformation through community - is where the political and pedagogical promise of WISE truly comes into view. Despite the project timeline, we are painfully aware that these are only the bare seeds of such a process. It is paramount that we at least achieved to lift these women and hope that the next decades will realistically bear the fruits.

Theoretical framework: from energy poverty to energy justice to a new world

Energy poverty has often been described in policy documents as a *technical problem* - a deficit of insulation, infrastructure, or affordability. Yet, as feminist and critical theorists remind us, material deprivation is never merely economic: it is relational, embodied, and political. What WISE brings into focus is precisely this relational dimension. Energy poverty is not just about cold homes; it is about whose labour keeps the home warm, whose voice counts in decision-making, and whose suffering remains unseen in the data tables.

The term *energy justice* thus marks an epistemic shift. It reframes energy not as a commodity, but as a commons of care, situating it within broader struggles for gender, social, and environmental justice. The fact that it has never entered commonsense and ordinary people when they encounter our project think we are referring to a life energy, the capacity to find



strength in a challenging world is beyond telling. Joan Tronto's ethics of care⁵ provides one of the most resonant frameworks for understanding this shift: justice begins not with rules or redistribution, but with *attentiveness* to the lived needs of others and the capacity to respond in a humane manner. From this perspective, feminist energy justice is not only about decarbonisation, but about reweaving the social fabric that has been frayed by brutal austerity, privatisation, and the depoliticisation of everyday life.

Silvia Federici's notion of *reproductive labour*^{6, 7} further clarifies the gendered dimensions of this struggle. Women, especially those in precarious or single-headed households, perform the invisible labour that sustains both families and communities under conditions of scarcity. Their unpaid work - cooking, heating, cleaning, caring - absorbs the systemic failures of energy markets and public policy. To speak of *energy solidarity*, then, is to make visible the hidden infrastructures of care that women already maintain, and to politicise them as sites of collective agency rather than private endurance.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the WISE methodology also resonates with Paulo Freire's idea of *conscientização* - the process by which oppressed groups develop critical awareness of their social conditions and act upon them⁸. In WISE workshops and events, women are not treated as beneficiaries but as co-producers of knowledge: experts of lived experience whose insights can reshape both local practice and European policy. Similarly, the influence of the Tavistock tradition⁹ - visible in Orion Grid's facilitation practice - brings a psychosocial depth to the project: attention to group dynamics, meaning, projection, and emotional containment as necessary conditions for democratic learning.

Taken together, these frameworks invite a rethinking of energy not as a

⁵ Joan C. Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

⁶ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

⁷ Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Brooklyn, NY: PM Press, 2012).

⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000).

⁹ See A. K. Rice, *Learning for Leadership: Interpersonal and Intergroup Relations* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1965).

technical subsystem but as a field of social imagination. The move from *energy poverty* to *energy justice* requires not only structural reforms, but also new collective imaginaries - new stories about interdependence, vulnerability, and power. Sarah Stein Lubrano's reflection that "the apocalypse isn't something you survive alone"¹⁰ captures this precisely: in an era of climate anxiety and social fragmentation, survival itself becomes a shared, narrative act. Energy solidarity, in this sense, is both material and symbolic - it provides warmth, but also meaning.

Through this lens, WISE Bulgaria can be seen as a critical theory and a feminist experiment in rebuilding social energy (or at least laying the seeds in for the decade to come): transforming private struggle into public solidarity, and local interventions into the seeds of a broader, transnational movement. The theoretical groundwork of WISE in Bulgaria is therefore not merely descriptive but generative - it models how social intervention can become a form of *collective world-making* within and beyond the European project.

Beyond its immediate material implications, the concept of *energy solidarity* carries a utopian and democratising potential. While its practical implementation remains constrained by political frameworks and institutional inertia, the idea itself gestures toward an alternative horizon of governance - one grounded in direct democracy, community empowerment, and collective stewardship of resources. Through energy solidarity, local communities can - in theory - evolve from passive consumers into active participants in decision-making, gaining direct control over their energy needs and, consequently, over their role in local governance.

Such a transformation holds the promise not only of democratizing the energy sector, but of cultivating a wider culture of self-organization and civic responsibility. It involves:

- Empowerment through *community ownership*, participatory monitoring, and shared control of resources;
- Building *resilience* through decentralized management;

¹⁰ *ibid.*

- Nurturing a *democratic ethos* that prioritizes collective problem-solving, community well-being, and ecological balance.

By allowing citizens to *experience* the benefits of democratic energy governance, the energy field itself becomes a laboratory for democratic innovation - a place where people learn the skills, sensibilities, and values necessary for self-governance. These local practices of co-management and shared accountability can, in turn, expand into broader social and political movements, embodying what Michel Foucault termed a *heterotopia* - a space that operates according to different logics than the dominant social order.

In his essay "*Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*"¹¹, Foucault describes heterotopias as "counter-sites" that offer alternative modes of living, thinking, and organizing. Energy solidarity projects as ours can be read potentially precisely in this sense: as heterotopic spaces of collective care, where communities assume responsibility for their own energy futures, privileging sustainability, cooperation, and reciprocity over profit. The example of the British company *Ecotricity* in the UK, while not immune to severe criticisms, illustrates this principle in practice: by involving citizens directly in decision-making, profit-sharing, and community events, it transforms the energy sector into a site of civic engagement and cultural renewal.

In these "other spaces," communities can at least in theory experiment with what might be called *counter-modernities of energy* - spaces of opposition and invention that challenge centralised, profit-driven infrastructures and in fact are capable through appealing to solidarity to transform them from within in the long run. They can function not only as technical innovations but as social rehearsals for democracy itself: arenas where cooperative ownership, distributed management, and participatory governance prefigure a more just and sustainable future. In this utopian vision, energy solidarity emerges as a transformative democratic practice - one that has the potential to decentralise power, strengthen communities, and give people a tangible stake in their collective destiny.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Architecture / Mouvement / Continuité* (October 1984), trans. Jay Miskowicz, <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> (original lecture 1967).

Methodology: the project as social intervention

The WISE project in Bulgaria was conceived not merely as a programme of awareness raising, but as a **living social laboratory** - an evolving set of participatory practices designed to bridge the gap between structural injustice and everyday experience. Rather than treating “beneficiaries” as data points or recipients of aid, the project approached them as *co-producers of social knowledge, agents of change* and *trustees of the project* in their own right. This methodological orientation - deeply influenced by feminist participatory action research, process facilitation, and psychosocial group work - positions WISE, at least in Bulgaria, as a **social intervention** rather than a conventional development project.

At the core of this methodology lies the recognition that energy poverty is not an isolated condition but a *relational system* involving policies, infrastructures, domestic labour, societal structures and social hierarchies. Addressing it therefore requires interventions at multiple levels: individual, communal, institutional, decision- and policy making. WISE Bulgaria responded to this challenge through a layered participatory design, integrating research, learning, and activism that are light touch, low key and carry the potential for a significant impact. Each stage of the project - assessment, dialogue, storytelling, and practical solidarity - was intentionally constructed as both a site of inquiry and of transformation.

1. The architecture of participation

The initial phase focused on *mapping the landscape of vulnerability* and *building an enabling environment*. Through the creation of the National Collective for Energy Solidarity comprising 12 other NGOs, Orion Grid brought together diverse stakeholders - grassroots women’s organisations, the emerging “Care” Coalition, architects, psychologists, local authorities, and lived experience experts. The Collective functioned so far as a promising microcosm of participatory democracy: a space where technical experts and marginalised citizens could think and act together across disciplinary and social divides.

Meetings were designed and facilitated using dialogical and group-analytic methods, drawing on the Tavistock tradition of process consultation. The



aim was to create what group theorists call a “*container*” - a psychological and social space capable of holding anxiety and complexity without collapsing into polarisation¹². This method proved essential in a context where conversations about poverty, gender, and state neglect often evoke feelings of shame, anger, and resignation. By establishing safety and mutual recognition, the process itself became transformative: a rehearsal of the kind of society WISE seeks to build for our ambitious project of laying the foundations for the next - probably thousands - of years to come.

2. Villa Eighta: an inter-breath feminist infrastructure of care and political learning

To sustain these processes, Orion Grid repurposed a physical site - Villa Eighta - as both a workspace and a community hub. Far from being a logistical convenience, this decision was strategic and symbolic. The Villa embodied the project’s commitment to “infrastructures of care as a zone of political learning”: spaces intended to nurture reflection, hospitality, and shared responsibility while aiming to embed it in ways to interpolate eco-cultural identities by direct contacts with barking and swimming pets and the nature outside in the small backyard - birds, squirrels, trees, grass and plants¹³. It hosted meetings of the Collective, study groups, a lecture and planning sessions, while also offering a haven for facilitators, activists, and vulnerable women to connect beyond institutional constraints.

In this way, the Villa functioned as what Michel Foucault might call a *hetero-topic site* - a place operating under different rules than the world outside, enabling participants to experience democratic practices in miniature. Decisions were aiming co-creation, snacks and beverages were shared

¹² See Wilfred R. Bion, *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1961).

¹³ In David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), Abram develops “inter-breathing” as a metaphor for the reciprocity between the human body and the animate Earth — a perfect reference if we use it as a poetic-ecological image of social and planetary interdependence and how we are all connected throughout breath(living beings, habitats,nature and ultimately the climate). See also Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*, trans. Mobi Ho (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), “inter-being” and “inter-breathing” are seen as relational ontologies — breathing as the act that connects all beings — which fits in the Orion Grid’s spiritual and ethical use within the idea of solidarity and shared life. See also Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), where Nancy uses the idea of “*partager le souffle*” — the shared breath — to describe community as a continuous act of co-existence, resonating with your reading of WISE as collective social energy.

collectively, and discussions were facilitated rather than structured to ensure equality of voice. The material and affective dimensions of this environment were integral to the methodology: the warmth of the space, the shared food and beverages, and the informal conversations between sessions often proved as meaningful as the formal agendas and even more so.

3. The "Party Against Apathy": method as ritual

A good example of the WISE methodology in practice was the event titled "Party Against Apathy." Held in April 2025 in Sofia, it combined video screenings, speeches, and facilitated group dialogues to mobilise reflection through art and collective experience. The event drew activists, human rights defenders, and citizens affected by energy poverty into an afternoon and an evening that was at once festive and analytical, emotional and political. By integrating visual storytelling with the World Café discussion format¹⁴, the event hopefully blurred boundaries between knowledge, experience and emotion, learning and celebration.

This deliberate synthesis transformed participation into a ritual of solidarity: films acted as mirrors of lived experience; small-group dialogues created intimacy across difference; the shared vegan meal prepared by one the members of our growing community reasserted the eco-social dimension of energy itself. The method did not seek consensus but *resonance* and *ripples* - the recognition that diverse experiences of vulnerability and even privilege in some ways could coexist within a common framework of dignity and justice. The "Party Against Apathy" thus exemplified WISE's central methodological principle: that social change is not transmitted through information but *generated through encounter and entanglements*¹⁵.

4. From environment to embodiment

Having established the enabling ecosystem, the project now moves into a new methodological phase - direct engagement with women in energy

¹⁴ Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005).

¹⁵ See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) as well as Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801–831.



vulnerability. This transition marks a shift from *intervening in the environment* to *co-creating embodied practices of solidarity*. Upcoming activities will link women to trained volunteers who can assist with low-cost home improvements, provide energy-saving literacy, and support participation in self-organised advocacy groups. Parallel workshops in storytelling and democratic dialogue will help participants translate private experience into collective voice, creating an archive of narratives that can inform policy from the bottom up.

This iterative methodology mirrors a cycle familiar to feminist action research: *reflection–action–reflection*^{16, 17, 18} as well as Kurt Lewin’s approach¹⁹ of *unfreeze -change- refreeze*²⁰. Each intervention is treated as an experiment in learning, where outcomes are measured not only in outputs but in transformations of awareness, relationships, and agency. The process thus generates what can be described as social energy - a renewable resource of trust, creativity, and solidarity that sustains both participants and institutions.

5. The project as a bridger and an enabler: ethics of facilitation

Underpinning all of this is a strong ethical orientation. The facilitators, drawn from Orion Grid’s team and evolving network of psychologists, educators, action researchers and activists, adhere to principles of non-hierarchical knowledge exchange, confidentiality, and collective accountability. Facilitation is treated not just as a specialised psychoanalytically informed skill but as a feminist craft that intertwines emotional labour with political consciousness. It seeks to balance structure with openness, ensuring that every participant - regardless of education, age, or status - has access to

¹⁶ Patricia Maguire, *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach* (Amherst, MA: Center for International Education, University of Massachusetts, 1987).

¹⁷ Marja-Liisa Swantz, Rachel Smith, and Orlando Fals-Borda, eds., *Participatory Action Research in Practice: Challenges and Possibilities* (London: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁸ Patti Lather, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1991) where Lather reframes the “reflection–action–reflection” cycle through post-structural feminist critique, emphasising knowledge, power, and reflexivity.

¹⁹ Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science: Selected Theoretical Papers*, ed. Dorwin Cartwright (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

²⁰ We are hopeful that despite the financial crisis currently threatening the project, after setting up a strong community of vulnerable women nested in a space contained by other organisations, an emerging pan-European movement and a wider environment driven by curiosity and care, there will be at the end something meaningful to “freeze” as a new status quo.

the shared process of meaning-making. In doing so, WISE contributes to what might be termed a *pedagogy of solidarity*: a form of democratic learning rooted not in abstraction but in lived interdependence.

Through this multi-layered approach, WISE Bulgaria redefines methodology itself as a political practice. Its interventions do not aim merely to “collect data” or “raise awareness,” but to *rehearse futures* - to construct temporary spaces in which alternative ways of living, knowing, and governing can be tried, felt, and refined. In this sense, WISE in Bulgaria stands not only as a project within the energy transition, but as a microcosm of transition: aiming a shift from alienation to participation, from scarcity to reciprocity, from isolation to shared power.

Discussion: constraints, contradictions, and the practice of time

Every social intervention unfolds within conditions that both enable and constrain it. WISE Bulgaria has illuminated not only the transformative potential of energy solidarity, but also the *temporal and structural pressures* that shape its practice. For many participants - including NGO professionals, facilitators, and especially women in precarious conditions - engagement itself becomes a form of labour squeezed into an already overburdened day.

In Bulgaria, where salaries remain the lowest in the EU and civil sector and social services are chronically underfunded, the very women whom WISE seeks to empower often inhabit an impossible temporality: juggling paid work, unpaid care, emotional labour, and parenting - frequently as single mothers - while being asked to participate in civic advocacy and policy dialogue. This tension reveals a paradox of contemporary activism: solidarity demands time, yet time itself has become a scarce resource, privatized and unequally distributed.

Even within supportive networks, coordination becomes an exercise in endurance. A telling example came when, for three months, a family of volunteers - a mother, father, and daughter - offered to help with practical repairs at Villa Eighta: changing light bulbs, sealing windows, cleaning the climate unit to reduce bills. Despite shared commitment, it took months



to align schedules, to carve out a single day when everyone could be present. When that day finally arrived, the act of *working together* transcended utility; it became an occasion for *bonding and belonging*, a modest yet profound enactment of solidarity. The experience underscored a simple truth: one cannot “jump in” to community - connection itself takes time.

There are also ideological resistances. During a walk outside of formal meetings, a single mother and participant in the project as an expert by experience confided her frustration: *“I cannot stay in the project, nothing personal to you at all- I deeply respect you and your work. But they tell us to limit our consumption, to make ourselves smaller, to give up the comfort of a long shower after a hard day - while we all know what they do to the forests in the Amazon.”* Her words encapsulate a widespread sentiment: that the rhetoric of responsible citizenship often disguises asymmetries of power and guilt, shifting the moral burden of sustainability onto those with the least agency to change systemic injustice. For many, energy solidarity cannot mean and should not mean further self-denial - it must mean redistribution and accountability from above.

At an institutional level, the challenges are equally tangible. The EU funding architecture itself reproduces precarity among the very civil-society actors it claims to support. Under the CERV programme, the funding is not only just a contribution to a wider funding organisations are somehow expected to obtain under a shrinking civil space and disappearing funding, but the final 40% of funding is released only after the project’s completion and bureaucratic approval, leaving small, newly established but vibrant NGOs such as Orion Grid exposed to cycles of debt and uncertainty. The paradox is sharp: the organisations most capable of fostering grassroots empowerment are structurally disempowered by financial mechanisms that privilege stability and liquidity—precisely the resources they lack.

And yet, within these constraints lies a paradoxical empowerment. By navigating these complexities - by surviving and persisting (as yet of this moment of time) - Orion Grid alongside stronger partners have entered the European stage as mediators between policy discourse and lived experience. Through its work, the project has given voice to groups and individuals long excluded from the technocratic vocabulary of energy transition. It

has demonstrated that even under precarious conditions, solidarity can be practiced not as a utopian abstraction but as a daily negotiation between care, exhaustion, depletion and courage.

Conclusion: toward a politics of social energy

The story of WISE Bulgaria as of now is, but also at the end of the day, a story of scale - of how small acts of repair and reflection resonate within large structures of power. By reframing energy as a matter of justice and relation, the project has created spaces where women, activists, and professionals could *feel* the possibility of democracy, however fleetingly. It has shown that social transformation does not occur in simply the grand gestures of policy, but in the modest, repeated acts of coordination, listening, and mutual care that keep communities alive.

In this sense, the true measure of WISE's impact may not lie in its deliverables or metrics, but in the *social energy* it has and will hopefully generate - a renewable resource of trust, creativity, and resilience. The project stands as both critique and prototype: a critique of the extractive logics that shape not only the energy sector but civil society itself, and a prototype for new forms of collective power grounded in feminist ethics, democratic learning, and the slow, patient work of building community.

Energy solidarity, as to be practiced in Bulgaria (and already practiced among us the growing community of the Orion Grid), is thus not simply about fighting for basic comforts or efficiency. It is about trying to reclaim the capacity to *imagine and organise* together - to fight to turn scarcity into connection, and precarity into purpose.

WISE targets low-income single women, single mothers, elderly women, and migrant women, who are generally more socio-economically vulnerable, which increases their risk of living in energy poverty. The project aims to raise awareness of energy justice and provide opportunities to participate in the development of policies to eradicate energy injustice. Project activities include developing and disseminating accessible content in Bulgarian on fair energy policy, fundamental energy rights, and rational energy use, as well as - and we are at the beginning of this stage - organis-



ing public events and mobilizing collective action at the local and national levels. Orion Grid's aim with this project is to stimulate civic participation, support the empowerment of vulnerable people and communities, and increase solidarity on issues and problems related to energy poverty and a just energy transition.

CAPTURED STATES AND CAPTURED SOCIETIES

Douhomir Minev



Abstract: The article explores the effects that undermine societies and their ability to function as autonomous social actors capable of identifying departures from their moral values and demanding compliance with them. The society's responses to such impacts are also examined. Many societies' replies demonstrate their ability to protect their identity, rationality, values, and judgments, as well as the social tissue that supports them, i.e. themselves. Furthermore, they defend states against capture by tiny small influential groups to establish social cohesion by weakening and capturing societies.

Key words: capture state, social cohesion, moral values, social capacity

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Introduction

The article discusses impacts that erode societies and their capacity to be autonomous social actors, possessing the ability to identify deviations from their moral values and demand compliance with those values. Society's reactions to such impacts are also discussed.

Erosive impacts on societies have been recorded by research based on the concept of the captured state, which in recent years has been expanded to include impacts aimed at reducing the ability of civil society, audit institutions and the media to uncover irregularities and demand improvements¹. The expansion of the concept was a response to changes in the behavior of state-capturing groups, which in many modern cases have extended the scope of their influence on states beyond policy formation. Elizabeth David-Barrett notes that this created two additional pillars in the idea of capturing states, besides influencing policy formation². One of them cov-

¹ Elizabeth Dávid-Barrett, "State capture and development: a conceptual framework", *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 26, (2023), 224–244.

² Dávid-Barrett, "State capture".

ers the control over the implementation of policies, which is carried out largely through the appointment of “right people” to key positions in the executive branch, through the allocation of budgetary funds, and through quasi-independent regulatory bodies (agency capture).

The other pillar of state capture encompasses the accountability ecosystem. It includes such impacts as: reducing the ability of audit institutions, civil society and the media to uncover irregularities and demand improvements; erosion of higher education (leading to a less skilled workforce) and restrictions on the media and freedom of speech; dismissals of academics who criticize the government, restrictions on university funding.

The inclusion of the last pillar in the concept of the captured state, and especially the deliberate reduction of civil society’s ability to expose irregularities and demand improvements, is an important step in the development of the concept of state capture.

But there are reasons to include other impacts in this pillar as well. These are impacts on societies that limit their capacity to be autonomous actors - opponents of state capture, by eroding the very foundations of societies, eroding their social tissue, and transforming societies into some other entities. These impacts go far beyond the impacts on civil society organizations, media, universities, and individual scientists.

1. *Rationality of Societies*

Societies’ capacity to expose irregularities and demand improvements, including resisting state capture, can be seen in terms of a specific kind of rationality that Max Weber calls value/intrinsic rationality. Action within this rationality is “[...] determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behaviour, independently of its prospects of success; [...] the more the value by which the action is oriented is elevated to the status of an absolute value, the more “irrational” the corresponding action is in this sense. For the more unconditionally the actor is dedicated to this value in itself, the less he is influenced by considerations of the conditioned consequences of his action³.

³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. By Guenther Roth and Claus Wittlich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 24–26.



Or, as Kalberg notes, decisions within the framework of value rationality are made based on some “value postulate, and not by calculation, assessment of causal relationships between ends and means.” Therefore, value (intrinsic) rationality provides a “unique standard” on the basis of which continuous empirical events in reality can be selected, measured, and judged, writes Kalberg⁴. When a sufficiently large part of societies adheres to value rationality, this allows for the achievement of that broad “similarity in thinking” that K. Larsen writes about and which underlies the capacity of societies to be more or less autonomous social actors⁵.

But the notion of value rationality has another side as well. The same complex of values that forms value rationality is simultaneously a major component of the “glue” that binds individuals in a community, i.e., determines social cohesion. The “bonding” role of moral values has long been well known and has been specifically studied by many who, like Durkheim, believe that not only do moral bonds exist, but that they are the strongest bonds between individuals in society. Therefore, it was in strengthening moral bonds that Durkheim sought a solution to many social problems.

In short, there are reasons to believe that value rationality shapes the capacity of societies to reveal irregularities and demand improvements; to be a more or less autonomous social actor with its own identity, capable of making value-based judgments and asserting its identity and rationality.

From the above, it follows that the limitation, the erosion of the capacity of societies “to reveal irregularities and demand improvements” consists primarily in the erosion of their value rationality and, more specifically, the erosion of the moral values on which value rationality is based. In this, societies themselves, their social tissue, inevitably erode, since shared values are a fundamental component of this tissue. Furthermore, eroding the capacity of societies to be opponents of state-capturing groups involves limiting the creation and use of the shared knowledge that societies have access to and use to challenge and resist state-capturing groups.

⁴ Stephen Kalberg, Max Weber’s Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 85, No. 5 (Mar., 1980), 1145-1179.

⁵ Christian A. Larsen, *Social cohesion: Definition, measurement and developments* (Working paper/Pre-print, Aalborg: Institut for Statskundskab, Aalborg Universitet, 2014), <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/egms/docs/2014/LarsenDevelopmentinSocialCohesion.pdf>.

All this shows that it is possible to supplement and expand the third dimension in David-Barrett's concept of state capture and even to form an independent fourth pillar that would include the societies capture. The grounds for this proposal are obvious – the limitation of value rationality through the erosion of moral values and the limitation of the creation and use of knowledge are much broader and more significant than those included in the third dimension of state capture.

2. *Decline of Value Rationality*

a. *Moral Values and their Decline*

Regarding values, a preliminary note is necessary - it is important to take into account the opinion of A. Etzioni, who emphasizes that the sociological analyze of values is deeply paralyzed. He criticizes the use of the term "values" in a "neutral way" so that it includes all kinds of "values" or, in other words, the notion of values is expanded so that it can also include components that can hardly be considered values. "Relativism – he writes – is the curse of the good society, because taken to its logical conclusion, it means that if you believe in concentration camps, the Gulag, ethnic cleansing, sex slavery, homophobia, sexism, racism or whatever – for you that will be the good society.... In order to be able to have the moral discourse that is necessary for the very concept of a good society, we need a foundation that is post-relativist, as even the most hardened relativists increasingly recognize"⁶.

This ideologically and politically influenced neutrality makes it difficult to answer questions like "Where do these values come from?" Are they justified? Whose values are they? Are they good?"⁷ In fact, values come from social evolution, from the very emergence of man and human communities; values are an effect of human evolution; values belong to communities and are a fundamental part of their construction.

This is why, according to Etzioni, breaking with relativism and finding a post-relativist basis for creating a notion of authentic values and distinguishing them from surrogates means, above all, a focus on values that

⁶ Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 189.

⁷ Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule*, 191.



emerged and developed in the course of social evolution as a means of self-construction of the human community. Based on an understanding of social evolution, it could be observed that not everything that some consider to be “values” participates (arises and is used) in the construction of human community. The evolutionary construction of communities can suggest which values are evolutionarily formed, authentic values.

Basic values can be considered those that have played a fundamental role in strengthening and developing communities (they were universal in nature or at least widespread) and have not been explicitly rejected to this day, although their social function may have weakened and deviations from them may be increasing. Habermas, for example, emphasizes the importance of four fundamental moral values (equality, justice, fairness, and reciprocity). All four values, in one way or another, have been present since ancient times. This is quite obvious about equality – that egalitarianism that Jonathan Sachs points out is fundamentally embedded in the Torah and which has been carried over into Christianity. Justice and fairness also have a fundamental presence in Judeo-Christianity⁸. The importance of reciprocity and honesty is highlighted in the fundamental research on cooperation conducted by Axelrod⁹. Emphasizing the important role of reciprocity for cooperation between individuals, Axelrod finds that without reciprocity, cooperation is impossible and is transformed into relations of slavery, exploitation, and oppression.

It is the decline of these authentic values that has attracted the attention of researchers recently. One of the most notable analyzes of this decline belongs to Jonathan Sacks (intellectual, rabbi, lord) who describes the trend of moral decline in Western societies as a shift in emphasis from “We” to “I.” Morality is being replaced by the market and the state, but they cannot replace it. Among the factors contributing to this change, Sachs points to social media, philosophy and economic theory, demands for political correctness, changes in personal identity, etc.¹⁰

⁸ Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

⁹ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (Revised edition, New York: Basic Books, 2006).

¹⁰ Sacks, *Morality*.

In fact, as Tom Switzer notes, moral values have constantly evolved throughout history, with many societies in each period beginning to tolerate behavior that was previously considered deviant, abnormal, or offensive. Sometimes this change has been sensible and rational, but sometimes it has been degenerative¹¹.

But in the past, societies have managed to correct degenerative changes in moral values, and therefore, over thousands of years of social evolution, moral values have not completely degenerated, and societies have managed to preserve features of human communities and, for long periods, follow a trajectory that allows them to achieve social progress.

This ability of societies noticeably began to change, and in the 1980s it was already clearly noticeable that a one-way and particularly intense erosion of the authentic, basic moral values that sustain societies was taking place. Moreover, according to Switzer, Western societies tolerate these failures and further contribute to the degradation of society by lowering their standards or compensating (through generous social payments) the victims of moral degradation, instead of taking measures against the degradation itself. According to Switzer, too many governments, for example, prefer to tolerate crime rather than address its root causes: drug trafficking, poverty caused by low achievement, and family breakdown, etc. There is a lack of serious political debate that could lead to addressing such problems. Behavior by the political class that a generation ago would have been considered unacceptable is now considered normal¹². The same is probably true of that behavior of political classes which we call the state capturing.

In this way, Switzer, as well as Jonathan Sachs and other authors, emphasize an important feature of the contemporary crisis of values - the deliberate impacts on them. On this occasion, Christian Larsen notes the pressure on basic pro-social values exerted by the increase in cultural diversity, emigration policies, etc. Larsen also notes that it is difficult to achieve similarity in thinking in diverse, multicultural and highly differentiated societies,

¹¹ Tom Switzer, *Instead of facing up to moral decline, west is lowering its standards* (The Centre for Independent Studies, December 30, 2023), <https://www.cis.org.au/commentary/opinion/instead-of-facing-up-to-moral-decline-the-west-is-lowering-its-standards/>.

¹² Switzer, *Instead of facing up to moral decline*.



which is directly related to the erosion of value rationality, which is the basis for similarity in thinking.

Convinced that it is necessary to build a common moral foundation for societies, Sachs emphasizes the need for change that would heal declining moral values. According to him, history shows that such a change is possible, as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "I"-oriented societies were successfully transformed into "We"-oriented societies.

Logical results of the decline of moral values are the decline of trust, which many empirical studies have recorded, and the emergence of an anomic crisis. According to Larsen, the observed decline in trust levels also reflects a decline in the moral standard of the societies studied, which Switzer also notes.

In conditions of declining values and anomic crises, lies, fraud, and manipulation widely penetrate models of political and economic behavior as well as interpersonal relationships. Moreover, these changes are combined with a decline in justice systems, which is characteristic of captured states.

Thus, the decline of value rationality deprives individuals and societies of the main tool through which they can identify and challenge irregularities and demand changes; it deprives them of identity and the ability to be an autonomous social actor. In this way, the conquest of states expands and turns into the conquest of societies, which acquire features of totalitarianism. For example, Switzer calls one of the most depressing collapses facing Western society the restriction of opportunities to question actions and ideas that are clearly absurd, such as biological males self-identifying as female and participating in women's sports. Others ridiculous, even crazy ideas become possible, such as that people who are not women (i.e. men) can menstruate; biological men may win "Woman of the Year" awards or win women's competitions; a man convicted of a crime can claim to be a woman and the court grants his request to be transferred to a women's prison. How all this helps the cause of biological women, Switzer writes, is unclear, but the examples provide evidence that a number of societies accept as normal ideas, statements and behavior that would be considered abnormal by any earlier standard. According to Switzer, absurd argu-

ments and claims are respected mainly by those who are afraid to question them, and because the fearful are so numerous, open individual resistance is relatively rare. But the main reason why absurdities are not challenged is another – the main tool through which people can identify absurdities and challenge them – their value rationality – has weakened. Therefore, in societies where moral decline is relatively weaker, statements, ideas, and behaviors like those mentioned above are considered abnormal – not because fewer people are afraid, but because their value rationality is better preserved and moral values generate a different kind of judgment.

b. Decline of Knowledge

Weber does not include knowledge in his definition of value rationality, but it is not possible for people to make decisions and take actions without using some knowledge. They use knowledge they possess even without realizing it. Therefore, the state of knowledge is also considered here as a component of societal capacity to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong, truth from untruth, etc.

The examples Switzer gives of absurd ideas and statements entering the public sphere are a small part of the flood of absurdities that floods the mainstream of entire sciences and the knowledge they create. It is no coincidence that Jonathan Sachs linked moral decline to philosophy and economic theory, but one could also add at least the decline (crisis) of the social sciences. In the decline of knowledge creation, several main aspects can be distinguished - a decline in the creation of knowledge (a crisis in the social sciences, in particular - sociology); a decline in the use of created knowledge; and a decline in the transfer of knowledge (education), which finds expression in the state of educational institutions and levels of education/literacy.

The crisis in knowledge production is mainly due to the mechanisms for controlling and directing scientific research, giving rise to a standard model of social research. About the effects of this standard model, Steven Pinker writes: "Leading social researchers can claim all sorts of absurdities as long as they fit the Standard Model of social science." It is hard to believe that

the authors themselves believe what they claim. Claims are made regardless of whether they are true. They are part of the catechism of our century. Contemporary social commentary remains based on archaic concepts.”¹³

As for the decline in the use of knowledge, it is expressed in the fact that, like moral values, surrogates are used instead of knowledge. Knowledge is often replaced with ideological postulates - which is especially characteristic of economics, social sciences, and when creating economic policies. A striking example is a Senate Committee hearing of former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, who, on the occasion of the 2008 financial crisis, stated that the crisis had revealed an “error” in the ideology by which he had been guided during his 18-year management of US monetary policy. The error that Greenspan has in mind is clearly due to replacing knowledge with ideological dogmas, or “supplementing” knowledge with such dogmas. Whatever the case, the fact remains that for 18 years, ideology has replaced knowledge in the formation of monetary policy. This is, of course, not the only such case. As a rule, many policies are formed largely on ideology.

As long as adequate knowledge is still created, special studies have found that politicians use only that knowledge that corresponds to their prior intentions¹⁴.

On this occasion, Nobel laureate Angus Deaton writes that politicians use economic analyze the way a drunkard uses streetlights - to lean on the poles, not for lighting¹⁵.

Other authors also emphasize the replacement of knowledge with surrogates in politics. Yaron Ezrahi has described the decline of the use of knowledge in political life through a series of transitions to new means of knowledge and policymaking: from wisdom to knowledge, from knowl-

¹³ Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (Penguin Books, 1997), 57.

¹⁴ Carol H. Weiss and Michael J. Bucuvalas, “Truth Tests and Utility Tests: Decision – Makers’ Frames of Reference for Social Science Research”, *American Sociology*, Vol. 45, № 2 (1980), 320–333.

¹⁵ Angus Deaton, “Is economic failure an economics failure?” *Project Syndicate* (December 12, 2022), <https://www.project-syndicate.org/magazine/economists-responsibility-for-bad-policies-and-outcomes-by-angus-deaton-2022-12>.

edge to information, and from information to outformation. According to him, outformation differs from scientific knowledge in that, like literature, poetry, and the arts, it directly engages the emotional, aesthetic, and more generally sensual essence of the individual¹⁶.

When using outformation, the communication between politicians and citizens turns into a kind of performance in which the performers - politicians use ignorance, ideology and forms of art in communication with the audience - citizens. The reason given by Ezrahi for the transition to outformation also points to this - the desire to make politics visible and entertaining enough to attract the attention of the viewers in front of the TVs (in which they also get a sense of participation), otherwise they will stop paying attention to politics and will switch to purely entertainment programs.

At the same time, Ezrahi points out, the status of science as an authority and social institution is also changing - a decline is occurring, in which the role of science as a factor in modern mass democratic politics is declining. Science is no longer the resource through which policies and public choices can be legitimized as impersonal, objective, and technical. Science is no longer as important a component of modern state power as it once was. That is why scientists are much less sought after than politicians, who seek to legitimize their positions and actions before a public that is neither informed nor skeptical¹⁷. In fact, not only politicians, but also citizens are less and less interested in social scientists and the knowledge they produce.

The state of education in general can be judged by the results of international standardized tests, where not Western, but East Asian and Singaporean students consistently win first places in the 2010s¹⁸ and 2020s¹⁹. But there is no room here to discuss this vast topic, and therefore only some notes by the aforementioned Tom Switzer are given. They are interested in

¹⁶ Yaron Ezrahi, "Science and the Political Imagination in Contemporary Democracies", in *States of Knowledge. The Co-Production of Science and Social Order*, ed. by Sheila Jasanoff (Routledge, 2004), 255.

¹⁷ Ezrahi, *Science and the Political Imagination*, 273.

¹⁸ Drew DeSilver, *US students' Academic Achievement Still Lags that of Their Peers in Many Countries* (Pew Research Center, February 15, 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/02/15/u-s-students-internationally-math-science>.

¹⁹ Leigh Thomas, "Mathematics, Reading Skills in Unprecedented Decline in Teenagers", *Reuters* (December 5, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/mathematics-reading-skills-unprecedented-decline-teenagers-oecd-survey-2023-12-05/>.



that he connects changes in education with changes in values. According to him, one of the consequences of the decline of values is poor school performance, which is exacerbated by poor or sometimes absent parenting, but also by the ideologically motivated refusal of teachers and other educational professionals to insist on more academic persistence and rigor. Schools, for example, make the situation worse by allowing students to stay out of classrooms, and in the education system, professors are less and less regarded as authorities, and in some American universities, professors live in fear of their students.

Switzer emphasizes the influence of changes in values on changes in education, also highlighting the implications of university policies towards “diversity, equality and inclusion.” In a number of universities, racial and gender-based preference policies take precedence over academic qualifications and administrative experience. Switzer cites one expert’s opinion that Harvard’s experience shows the dangers of “identity politics” - once the standards for hiring administrators and admitting students are lowered, the standards for evaluating their behavior and achievements must inevitably be lowered as well. The result is that prestigious universities like Harvard hire people who have no place there to manage people who also have no place there.

c. *Decline of truth*

It can be expected that changes in moral values and knowledge, by limiting value rationality, will limit the ability of individuals and societies to make judgments of fundamental importance such as distinguishing between good and evil, between knowledge and ignorance/non-knowledge, truth and untruth/deception, etc. This effect is particularly evident with regard to “outformation”. It is no coincidence that the claim that we live in a “Post-Truth Era” has emerged.

It is precisely a weakening ability to distinguish truth from falsehood that a study by the RAND Corporation with the meaningful title finds: “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life”²⁰. According to the study, over the past two de-

²⁰ Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael Rich, *Truth Decay. An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of*

ades, national political and civic discourse in the United States has been characterized by a “Truth Decay”, due to the decline of factual information and analyze in American public discourse. Authors Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich identify four key trends shaping this decay: growing disagreement about facts, blurring of the lines between opinion and fact, increasing influence of opinion over fact, and declining trust in previously respected sources of factual information.

The most harmful consequences of decay are cited as the erosion of civic discourse, political paralysis, alienation and detachment of people from political and civic institutions, and uncertainty about national politics. Overall, the report highlights that the truth decay poses a threat to the political process and democracy.

2. Consequences of the erosion of value rationality

The answer to the question of what is the meaning of these impacts on societies, eroding their rationality, is clearly evident in the consequences of this erosion. Generally speaking, the consequences are a weakening of the capacity of societies to resist the capturing elites who have captured the state and are imposing profound changes on the very foundations of societies, eroding their ability to make sense of and resist the state capture and the other changes that the elites who captured the state are imposing. The erosion of value rationality is an erosion of the capacity of societies to identify the very capture of the state and of themselves.

From another perspective, the impacts on the rationality of societies facilitate the achievement of a “consensus” between societies and capturing elites and increase cohesion in society, as the erosion of value rationality and the limitation of social capacity reduce potential tensions and conflicts between capturing elites and societies.

a. Changes in individual attitudes towards maintaining and upholding notions of justice

At the individual level, a noticeable consequence of the described changes is, for example, the tendency towards weakening attitudes towards

Facts and Analysis in American Public Life (RAND report, 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2314.html.



upholding notions of justice. The trend manifests itself as a small and decreasing share of people who are inclined to actively oppose injustice. Individual behavior becomes more passive and conciliatory.

The aforementioned Switzer notes people's fear of questioning actions and ideas that are clearly absurd and calls it one of the most depressing collapses facing Western society. As the trend toward weakening morally based judgments increasingly draws attention, one website asks the question: „Why is there a lack of people fighting injustice?“²¹. Individual people answer and discuss different factors, but what the platform's AI assistant provides them with, as a summary of possible answers, are the following most likely reasons:

Fear and risk: Many people may fear consequences for speaking out, such as social rejection, job loss, or even physical harm.

Apathy and decreased sensitivity: In a world saturated with news of injustices, some people become desensitized to injustice or feel overwhelmed.

Lack of awareness: Some people may not be fully aware of the injustices that exist.

Social norms and individual behavior conditioning: In many societies, there are norms and expectations that discourage dissent or activism. Therefore, people may be more inclined to accept the status quo rather than challenge it.

Limited resources: Activism often requires time, money, and energy. People facing economic hardship or personal challenges find it difficult to find resources to engage in activism.

Fragmentation: Sometimes social movements can be fragmented, with different groups focusing on different issues. This fragmentation can reduce efforts and make it difficult to coordinate collective actions.

Psychological barriers: Cognitive dissonance can prevent people from acting against the injustices they witness, especially if acknowledging these injustices conflicts with their beliefs or identity.

²¹ Quora, Why is there a lack of people fighting against injustice? <https://www.quora.com/Why-is-there-a-lack-of-people-fighting-against-injustice>

Cultural factors: In some cultures, there may be a stronger emphasis on conformity and harmony within the community, which may inhibit individual action against perceived injustices.

In most of the reasons listed by the site, a connection can be noticed with the reasons for the weakening of public capacity: insufficient “similarity in thinking”, i.e. weakening of value rationality, which determines similarity; weakening of commitment to shared basic moral values, which determines value rationality; weakening of the relevant moral feelings (reduced sensitivity), which activate behavior to uphold values and thus determine the tendency towards decreasing activism.

A connection between the reasons stated on the website for the “lack of people fighting against injustice” and the weakening of the public capacity to maintain and uphold justice is also noticeable in the proposed measures to engage people in the fight against injustice. Most of these activities are aimed at strengthening the components that form public capacity: community building: fostering a sense of solidarity and shared purpose that motivates people to join collective efforts; creating forums or discussion groups where people can share and engage in dialogue about injustices; supporting open conversations that promote understanding and empathy; engaging communities: mobilizing local communities; creating grassroots movements that encourage community participation and engagement; collaboration with other organizations and movements to enhance efforts and share resources; building coalitions focused on intersecting issues; increasing education and awareness.

b. Changes in civil society organizations

Some authors raise the question of whether civil society can oppose the state²². From the perspective of the topic under discussion, the question can be formulated as follows - can civil society organizations oppose the capture of the state and societies? As Kabakchieva's work shows, such a confrontation did not take place. Civil society fails to effectively influence the state and its policies (respectively – the capturing elites who shape policies) and fails to make adjustments to the political agenda when policies

²² Petya Kabakchieva, *Civil Society Against the State* (Sofia: LIK, 2001), in Bulgarian.

or legal norms are judged to be unjust. This weakness of civil society and its organizations is not unique to Bulgaria. The situation is similar in many other countries, where research shows that the policies being implemented are judged to be unjust, and civil society organizations cannot influence this situation.

Obviously, changes in individuals' attitudes to maintain and uphold notions of justice also affect the state of civil society organizations. Lichterman highlights the major concerns that are being raised by debates about the state of (American) civic engagement²³. Analyzers are interested in why civic engagement is declining when it is expected that civic associations can and should cultivate ordinary citizens' ability for social self-organization, their ability to develop interactions with the public. Obviously, the state of civic associations today is far from the state that made a strong impression on Alexis de Tocqueville. Democracy also suffers from these changes, as it depends not only on government, but also on citizens who can "do things" together with a wide range of other people, groups, and institutions, instead of being just obedient subjects of the state²⁴.

But in captured states, the role of NGOs is changing. Empirical research shows that many NGOs are transforming, acquiring more characteristics of business structures and operating as such. Researchers also notice a tendency for nonprofit organizations to adopt market approaches and values, which reduces the ability of these organizations to create and maintain a strong civil society. This trend emerges when examining the main market practices in the nonprofit sector – generating commercial revenue, competing for contracts and funding, donor influence, and the development of social entrepreneurship – and examines their adverse impact on the contribution of nonprofit organizations to the state and development of civil society²⁵.

The situation is similar for NGOs, which have explicitly declared that their mission is to support and promote social justice. But what are the specif-

²³ Paul Lichterman, "Social Capacity and the Styles of Group Life: Some Inconvenient Wellsprings of Democracy", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 52, №6 (2009), 846-866.

²⁴ Lichterman, *Social Capacity*, 847.

²⁵ Angela M. "Eikenberry and Jodie Drapal Kluver, The Marketization of the Nonprofit Sector: Civil Society at Risk?" *Public Administration*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (2004), 132-140.

ic activities through which they achieve this goal is not entirely clear. For example, out of a dozen such organizations randomly selected in the US, four work to achieve racial justice by ending mass incarceration, excessive punishment, and police brutality by organizing and educating young black people. Two organizations support social justice by supporting LGBT communities. One organization strives to uphold the values of democracy and advocates for equality and the rule of law, and another works for fair elections.

The situation is similar for other civil society organizations. Sandra Kröger, based on a large-scale literature review, has examined the role of civil society organizations in policy-making in various areas in the EU, and her conclusions about their state are very pessimistic²⁶. Furthermore, it appears that decision-makers maintain a perception of consultations and other interactions with NGOs, but select those that share the views of the relevant state institutions. Some researchers, who are even more critical of civil society organizations, directly write about “bad civil society.”²⁷

c. Reactions of local communities

Local communities seem to be less affected by the erosion of value rationality and social capacity. A number of signs show that at the level of local communities, the capacity to maintain and uphold values, including notions of justice, is relatively better preserved. It can be said that local communities are particularly prone to making “conscientious objections” that Ceva²⁸ writes about.

It is these communities that react most intensely in cases where their judgments about a given policies are negative. For example, when their natural environment is damaged, including in cases where the damage is the result of activities to implement the green transition. This higher “reactivity” is obviously related to a relatively strong commitment of community members to common (and authentic) values and shared knowledge (in-

²⁶ Sandra Kröger, *Nothing but Consultation: The Place of Organized Civil Society in EU policy-making across policies* (European Governance Papers (EUROGOV) No. C-08-03, 2008), <http://www.connex-net-work.org/eurogov/pdf/egp-connex-C-08-03.pdf>.

²⁷ Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein, *Bad Civil Society*, *Political Theory*, Vol. 29, № 6 (2001), 837.

²⁸ Emanuela Ceva, “Political Justification through Democratic Participation: The Case for Conscientious Objection”, *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 41, No 1 (2015).

cluding local knowledge), which also determines the achievement of similarity in thinking and a capacity for collective action. It is no coincidence that the most impressive studies of successful community action concern local communities. In local communities, especially in small ones, the level of attachment to basic moral values is higher compared to large urban conglomerates and their characteristic anonymity. In small communities, people know each other better, the level of trust is much higher, and in any case, people know well who can be trusted and who cannot. The sense of belonging, of obligations to the community, of solidarity, mutual assistance, etc. is also stronger. This specificity of local communities stands out particularly clearly in the works of Elinor Öström, who shows that local communities can be independent social actors and more – they can deal with problems without government interventions (setting goals, regulations, control) and without the “invisible hand” of the market mechanism. Specifically, through joint voluntary action, communities can maintain justice both in the collective use of limited common resources and in their conservation and preservation of opportunities for their future use.

But this capacity is not fully utilized for effective action in defense of justice. The reason is that local communities do not have enough power to influence the main problems of the community.

This lack of power is one of the effects of state capture. The researchers attributed the lack of sufficient power of local communities to two reasons. One is the incompatibility of their power and capacity with the systems of state governance and economic management. The other reason is the lack of democracy at the local level, where alliances between local government and local business are often not only a generator of corrupt practices, but also possess and use the means to control local communities.

d. Transformation of societies. Decline in social cohesion and trust

As might be expected, the decline of authentic moral values gives rise to a decline in social cohesion. The results of a number of empirical studies confirm this expectation. In an extensive review of the literature on the concept of social cohesion, David Schiefer and Jolanda van der Noll write

that most researchers consider cohesion to be a desirable characteristic of societies, but they usually emphasize that it is in decline²⁹.

Using levels of social trust as an indicator of the state of social cohesion, Larsen obtains a result that is typical of most other studies – a decline in trust and social cohesion³⁰. The decline of social cohesion is the other face of growing individualism, which goes so far that, according to some, if the trend continues, the person of the future will be a sociopath or psychopath. It is clear that such individuals cannot be “fighters against injustice.”

Based on data from the World and European Values Survey, Larsen shows that high levels of social trust are found in only five of the 52 countries covered by the World Survey (the Netherlands, China, Sweden, New Zealand, and Australia). In these countries, respondents who indicate that “most people can be trusted” outnumber those who answer that “one has to be very careful.” In the remaining 47 countries, those who responded that “one has to be very careful” outnumbered the group showing social trust. Among societies where less than ten percent of citizens believe that most people can be trusted are countries such as the Philippines, Trinidad and Tobago, Colombia, Ghana, Ecuador, Cyprus, Romania, Zimbabwe, Peru and Malaysia.

According to Larsen, this result is actually optimistic because the picture would change and the result would become even darker if one takes into account that some of the respondents expressing trust in most people actually have very little trust in a person they are meeting for the first time. If such an adjustment is made for the level of trust, only one of the 52 countries - New Zealand (57%), crosses the threshold for a majority of trusting people. Sweden (46 percent) is close to this threshold, while social trust falls significantly in Australia (33 percent), the Netherlands (25 percent) and China (14 percent).

The findings of the ESS show that improvements in objective living conditions do not lead to greater social cohesion. Larsen noted that this is not really surprising given what we know about social trust - it is unlikely to be

²⁹ David Schiefer and Jolanda van der Noll, “The Essentials of Social Cohesion: A Literature Review”, *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 132, (2017), 579-603.

³⁰ Larsen, *Social cohesion*.



created simply because a society is wealthier.

One expected result that Larsen notes is that social trust is negatively related to levels of corruption in the state apparatus. The attitude towards corruption is also an attitude towards the conquest of the state, since the level of corruption is a key indicator of the conquest of the state.

The above-mentioned consequences of the erosion of value rationality and knowledge are significant enough and, if they persist in the future, it can be expected that profound transformations will occur in societies themselves. The weakening of social cohesion, the strong growth of individualism and, along with this, the retention of power and control over societies through weak democratic political institutions can transform societies into what some scholars call Artificial Social Systems (ASS) or – according to Wallerstein’s prediction – lead them to a state of historically unprecedented system of slavery.

d. *Reactions of societies. Conscientious Objection and Political Activism*

A number of events in recent years have shown that societies have the ability to recover from the erosive impacts to which they are subjected to by the elites conquering the countries. Banfield has long noticed this and writes that there is no evidence that the ethos of a people can be changed by plan. It is one thing to create consent through techniques of mass manipulation, but to directly change people’s fundamental view of the world, i.e. the guiding beliefs, ideals or ideologies that guide behavior, is quite another³¹.

This is the opinion of other scholars, who believe that levels of social trust are “sticky”, i.e. quite stable over time and emphasize the sustainability of the “bonding” of social groups over time³².

A clear sign of the resilience of moral values, or rather, of a self-protective reaction of societies, can be seen in the changes occurring in the values of

³¹ Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (The Free Press, 1958), 165, <https://coromandal.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/edward-c-banfield-the-moral-basis-of-a-backward-society.pdf>.

³² Larsen, Social cohesion; Alexandre Marc, Alys Willman, Ghazia Aslam, Michelle Rebosio and Kanishka Balasuriya, *Societal Dynamics and Fragility. Engaging Societies in Responding to Fragile Situations* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2013).

Generation Z. The generation was born and grew up during a period of the aforementioned impacts on authentic prosocial values and has undoubtedly been significantly influenced by these impacts. But as research shows, Generation Z is beginning to shift from left-wing political beliefs to right-wing beliefs.³³ The more important change, however, is another one – the generation is changing its value system and reorienting itself towards more “traditional” i.e. authentic pro-social values. This transition from one value system to another raises the question of what was the source of the values that the generation is abandoning. Obviously, the main source may be the education system, where the educational process is constructed in such a way as to erode authentic values and replace them with others. And this is probably a technology for the deepest erosion of the social tissue of societies. Only with the acquisition of life experience and increased knowledge of the social world do young people begin to abandon the matrix created by deformed education. From a political point of view, such an impact on the education system means that in the captured state, education serially produces citizens with certain value systems and political beliefs, which is simply a manipulation of the democratic political system.

Another impressive protective reaction of societies can be considered the so-called „populist breakthroughs“ that took place in a number of countries in Europe, the United States, Latin America, and Asia. These breakthroughs, aimed at removing ruling political forces from power, are usually interpreted as tendencies towards authoritarianism and dictatorships. In reality, there is no convincing explanation for these changes in political behavior.

In the literature, the rise of so-called “authoritarian populism” has received three types of explanations. According to one of them, economic problems caused by globalization, including growing income inequality, have led voters in the “abandoned” industrial and rural regions of the West to support extremist parties. According to the second explanation, the cause of authoritarian breakthroughs is the decline of state capacity – the capacity

³³ Henry Samuel and James Jackson, “How European Young Voters Flocked to the Hard-Right”, *The Telegraph* (June 10, 2024); Gus Carter, “Meet the Zoomer Doomers: Britain’s Secret Right-Wing Movement”, *The Spectator* (Sept. 4, 2025).



of governments to formulate and implement adequate policies.³⁴

According to a third explanation, the turn in electoral behavior represents a “retroactive reaction” to “. cultural changes that threaten the worldview of once dominant sectors of the population.”³⁵

The first two explanations are obviously related to negative assessments (including morally based assessments related to violating notions of justice) of the effects of laws and implemented policies, i.e. at least some of them can be seen as reactions against captured states. But in the third explanation (“cultural changes that threaten the worldview of once dominant sectors of the population”), changes in values are quite clearly seen as the cause of “authoritarian breakthroughs.” The authors citing this reason define it as a “retro reaction” to groups that “once dominated”, but in fact, the reaction can be explained in a completely different way. The reaction is the resistance of societies against what the authors call “cultural changes”, but are actually the impacts eroding the basic value complexes of societies.

As societies perceive ruling elites as the primary cause of the erosion of their moral complex and identity, societies become activated and take action to remove these elites from power.

The radicalism of this political reaction to the erosion of values may also be contributed by ineffective democratic institutions and participatory mechanisms that are unable to “transmit” demands “from the bottom up” and do not allow citizens, sharing common moral values, to influence unwanted changes.

Signs of resistance by politically active societies against their erosion can also be seen in another change – the looming crisis of the liberal international order.

Authors of Foreign Affairs write that “the liberal international order is dying, and its transatlantic supporters are mourning [...]. Some are angry and condemn the US president for needlessly destroying what they hold dear,

³⁴ Roberto Stefan Foa, “Why Strongmen Win in West States”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 32, № 1 (January 2021), 52.

³⁵ Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “*Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash*”, Faculty Research Working Paper Series, Harvard Kennedy School, 2016, 1.

and they promise to move forward to strengthen global institutions.”³⁶

Existing explanations for this crisis focus on the uneven distribution of wealth and values, which creates losers and thus breeds discontent. But the authors emphasize that there is no answer to the important question of why this discontent turns into a loss of legitimacy and a crisis of the liberal international order, rather than a challenge to policies.³⁷

An analyze by John Mearsheimer seems to answer this question.³⁸ Seven years ago, he predicted that in international relations, the liberal “grand strategy” of spreading human rights and liberal democracy was doomed to failure. The reason for this is that a strategy based on liberal assumptions about human nature overvalues individual rights and ignores nationalism and realism, and therefore cannot be successful. According to Mearsheimer, in politics, human beings care more about the interests of their groups than about individual rights, and in international relations, social groups (nation-states) are sensitive to their sovereign rights. In other words, liberal assumptions about human nature do not correspond to the nature (identity, rationality) of the human societies in which liberal ideology spreads. Therefore, a conflict arises between the liberal ideology and the societies (their value rationality) in the countries where the ideology is transferred. This conflict causes a deterioration in relations between countries and wars.

The above reactions of many societies prove that they have the capacity to defend their identity, rationality, values, judgments; to defend the social tissue that builds them, i.e. to defend themselves. Moreover, they also defend states, as they oppose their capture by small influential groups that seek to achieve social cohesion by weakening and capturing societies.

³⁶ Stacie Goddard, Ronald Krebs, Christian Kreuder-Sonnen and Berthold Rittberger, “Liberalism Doomed the Liberal International Order. A Less Legalistic System Would Help Protect Democracies”, *Foreign Affairs Today* (July 28, 2025), 1.

³⁷ Christian Kreuder-Sonnen and Berthold Rittberger, *The LIOn's Share: How the Liberal International Order Contributes to its Own Legitimacy Crisis*, (Open Forum Series, Center for European Studies, Harvard, 2025), 2.

³⁸ John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).



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