Report:

Youth Participation in the Bulgarian updated NECP draft



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This report aims to raise awareness among the Bulgarian general public on the shortcomings of the implementation of the Governance Regulation in Bulgaria, particularly regarding the updating of National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) in the period 2022/2023. It aims to assess to what extent the Bulgarian civil society and youth has had an opportunity to advocate for more inclusive NECP processes, in line with the requirements of the 2018 Governance Regulation. In addition, it aims to propose specific recommendations on how to improve the youth engagement process in Bulgaria.

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This report has been prepared following interviews with youth and non-youth civil society representatives from Bulgaria.

Introduction

What are NECPs and why should you(th) participate in them?

NECPs are national plans integrating environmental and energy policies key to achieving the EU 2030 target of 55% GHG emissions reduction (compared to 1990 levels). They are the key plans in achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, a target that has been decided to prevent dangerous climate change (but controversial as to whether it is sufficient to do so). NECPs should therefore explain policies relating to renewable energy, energy efficiency, energy poverty, agriculture, etc... which will have massive socioeconomic impact and on which the secure livelihoods of future generations will depend. The first NECP (draft NECP) was called to be submitted by 31 December 2018, and the final NECP by 31 December 2019. The draft and final updated NECPs then were/are called to be submitted by 30 June 2023 and 30 June 2024 respectively.

Youth participation in the drafting and implementation of NECPs is essential for several reasons:

1. The content of the NECPs will have long-lasting effects on the lives of the youngest generations. Young people will be most affected by the consequences of climate change and the energy choices made now. Involving youth ensures that their perspectives and interests are taken into account, promoting **intergenerational equity**.

2. Young people can contribute to a **long-term commitment** to climate and energy goals. By involving them in the planning process, it is possible to then encourage them to take an active role in sustainability and climate action throughout their lives

3. Youth participation can help hold **governments and decision-makers accountable** for meeting their climate and energy targets. Their involvement can ensure transparency and foster a culture of accountability in the implementation of NECPs.

4. Youth participation ensures a **more diverse set of perspectives** at the decision-making table, including those from underrepresented or marginalised groups. This diversity can lead to more comprehensive and equitable climate and energy policies.

5. Involving young people in the drafting and implementation of NECPs provides them with valuable **educational and capacity-building opportunities**. They can learn about the complexities of energy and climate issues and gain skills that are crucial for the future of the EU.

6. Youth can provide insights into how to **make NECPs more adaptable and resilient** to future challenges, as they will be dealing with the long-term consequences of today's decisions.

7. Many countries have committed to international climate agreements such as the **Paris Agreement**, which emphasise the importance of public participation. Involving young people aligns with these global commitments.

In conclusion, youth participation in the drafting and implementation of NECPs is essential to ensure that these plans are not only effective but also inclusive, innovative, and future-oriented. By involving young people, governments can better address the challenges of climate change and energy transition while creating a sense of ownership and commitment among the generation that will bear the brunt of these challenges.

Legal Basis for Youth Participation

The Governance Regulation

The legal basis for National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) is the 2018 Governance Regulation. This regulation outlines the rules and requirements for how countries should plan and manage their energy and climate policies within NECPs.

When it comes to involving the public, there are **two key provisions**:

1 Public Consultations

Article 10 states that there must be public consultations, which means that the public should have the opportunity to give their opinions and feedback. For public consultations, the NECPs must include a summary of what the public thinks based on the consultations. The processes used for these consultations should follow the guidelines of the Aarhus Convention. This Convention ensures that the public is given early and effective opportunities to be involved in decision-making processes related to the environment, as well as access to environmental information. In simpler terms, it's about making sure that the public has a say in the decisions that affect energy and climate policies, and these processes should be fair and transparent.

2 MCEDs

Article 11 emphasises the need for **multi-level stakeholder energy and climate dialogues** (MCEDs). This means that different groups and stakeholders should have discussions about energy and climate issues at various levels. **Article 17(2) (b)** obliges Member States to report on the progress made in establishing MCEDs “where applicable”.

Commission Guidance

In December 2022, the Commission provided Guidance on how to apply the Governance Regulation. This is, nevertheless, not legally binding but a guiding instrument on how the Governance Regulation should be implemented.

Section 3.2 refers to public participation provisions. It suggests ensuring adequate time for meaningful and easily accessible consultations. It emphasises the significance of "Social dialogue and a whole-of-society approach" in crafting and implementing effective energy and climate policies.

According to the Guidance, member states (MS) are required to clarify how the views of the public were taken into account ahead of submitting the NECPs. Additionally, MS should detail how the process allowed the public to participate transparently and fairly.



How has public participation in the NECP been so far in Bulgaria?

Bulgaria has been in a persisting political turmoil since 2020 as there have been no conclusive election results in consecutive different rounds of votes giving political parties enough support to form a stable coalition government. This has severely impacted the process of data collection, analysis and public consultation of many strategic documents, including the revised Bulgarian NECP.

Reviewing the European Commission's comments on the previous Bulgarian NECP, along with many deficiencies for energy and climate targets, **the stakeholder consultation process has been unable to foster adequate, timely and inclusive stakeholder engagement**. Although an overall engagement strategy had been defined during the drafting of the first version of the NECP by an external consultant, there is limited implementation of measures that go beyond the minimal legal requirements for public consultation and overall engagement of different stakeholders.

"There has been very limited information in Bulgaria's public space regarding the update of the NECP. Friends of the Earth Bulgaria prompted public dialogue in May-June 2023, presenting nominations for NECP Measures Awards – what to include and avoid in the revised document."

– Radostina Slavkova, Energy & Climate Coordinator, Friends of the Earth Bulgaria

How has youth participation in the NECPs been so far in Bulgaria?

To better understand the process of engaging youth, we conducted interviews with young individuals in Bulgaria. Communication channels have been inadequate with a severe lack of transparency. The overall process of engaging in NECPs has been disappointing, failing to meet the state's obligations under the Governance Regulation.

The survey below indicates the average response of youth civil society members who have been interviewed:

Between 1-10, how satisfied are you with the level of youth participation in your country?



Between 1-10, how impactful do you feel your comments have been in consultations relating to NECPs?



Between 1-10, how accessible do you think the NECP participation process in your country has been?



The issues met in terms of public participation are further elaborated here:

Lack of adequate public consultation timeframe

Organisations and individuals interviewed reported that the public consultation process was not organised in a way that encouraged and promoted involvement and participation.

"The only opportunity for youth organisations to participate in the NECP process was the public consultation window from the end of December 2023 until mid-January 2024, which was completely insufficient given the holidays spanning Christmas and the start of the new year." - Alexander Georgiev, PanGea Bulgaria

"The public consultation process itself was passive - the public were invited to have their say on the NECP process, but not many stakeholder engagement events were organised to facilitate dialogue between them and the policymakers." - Alexander Georgiev, PanGea Bulgaria

Limited access to information and opportunities to participate

There is a lack of easy-to-understand, thorough and consistent information regarding the NECP, as well as other energy and climate related policies. The absence of a unified and trusted channel to share such information is a major challenge for public and youth participation.

Climate and energy issues are still distant for a large proportion of young people in the country and they do not feel equipped to actively participate in decision-making processes such as those related to the NECP. The reasons for this are the low awareness of some of the country's youth on topics related to environmental protection and addressing the impacts of climate change, as well as the completely insufficient participation opportunities specifically addressed to youth. - Alexander Georgiev, PanGea Bulgaria

"Youth needs to be empowered by public authorities so that they have realistic opportunities to be part of policy advocacy activities." - Vihren Mitev, ManEco Foundation

Lack of an overall consultation strategy and inadequate institutional culture

Organisations and individuals interviewed report that the overall consultation strategy related to the NECP should be changed, transitioning into a more proactive model whereby public authorities collaborate with civil society in order to achieve meaningful involvement in the process.

*"A two way approach is needed - institutions need to be active and present multiple opportunities for youth involvement. On the other hand, civil society should actively seek involvement." - Plamen Peev and Polina Slavcheva, BlueLink Bulgaria **

It is necessary to explain to young people why this process is important, how it contributes to policies in Bulgaria, to explain how it can actually affect their lives, and not just be seen as some 200-page document that does not concern them in any way. - Ventsislava Kozhuharova, Energy & Climate Coordinator, Friends of the Earth Bulgaria

Furthermore, a statement of WWF Bulgaria, supported by Greenpeace Bulgaria, Habitat for Humanity Bulgaria, Center for the Study of Democracy and other active organisations reveals that public participation has been scarce and untimely. Information on the Ministry of Energy's website was difficult to find and often published last-minute. There was no information explaining the timeline of the updated NECP process, violating binding access to information provisions.

The statement also highlighted that the public consultation process should include youth organisations and individuals explicitly, as this will allow Bulgarian youth to contribute to long-term commitments to climate and energy goals with a view to their long-term impact and future consequences on their lives.

The statement of the Bulgarian Climate Coalition, the largest union of energy and climate organisations in Bulgaria, also confirmed these views.

*BlueLink NECP Statement submitted on 22.01.2024. Available at: https://www.bluelink.net/files/attachments/blulink_stanovishche_za_inpek.docx_.pdf

Recommendations
to the Bulgarian government



Create a dedicated national NECP platform to promote transparency by adequately communicating participation opportunities in consultations and MCED developments. Ask for and effectively consider the feedback of civil society in setting up this platform.



Provide the draft for the final updated NECP as soon as possible, and no later than a date which still allows for early and effective public participation. This will then open the floor for public consultations, which would ideally be accompanied by an explanatory document of the NECP to reduce technical barriers for participation.



Set up a dedicated campaign with the involvement of civil society that unifies information regarding the NECP, its objectives and targets that is excessive and widespread.



Ensure the application of the Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations to highlight that future generations have the right to equal enjoyment of all human rights. The Bulgarian government should guarantee the rights of future generations as set out in these principles without discrimination of any kind, and refrain from any conduct which can reasonably be expected to result in, or perpetuate, any form of discrimination against future generations.



Host dedicated information sessions and meetings that allow for constructive dialogues between representatives of different institutions and young people. These sessions should be hosted at least once every two months. This will allow for building capacity on NECP content and gather the views of more young people, so that "diverse groups of citizens are facilitated to learn, exchange ideas and perspectives and develop collective recommendations" (EEB, 2023).



Involve youth organisations and individuals in the process of passing environmental assessments in relation to the NECP.



Per the Commission Guidance, release a statement demonstrating how the views of the public were considered and how the NECP process has been transparent, at a time that allows for further participation.



Adopt good practices from other MS' NECPs: The Lithuanian NECP has included an "alternative policy measures" section based on the proposals made in the public consultations. "The alternative policy measures presented in a separate list for each sector were additionally included in the National Plan, taking into account the proposals made in the public consultation. These measures will be considered as an alternative to the elements of the PPM scenario in order to achieve the national targets prior to approval thereof in the legislation."

Initiate the set-up of a specific department within the national administration that is dedicated to public engagement.

Conduct analysis on how to best involve youth organisations and individuals in energy and climate policy, including the best ways to participate (e.g., provide ways for digital participation, polling and other tools). This analysis should be conducted with the involvement of youth organisations. Also identify the most important aspects of young individuals in Bulgaria.

"There is a need to provide opportunities to engage in these processes that are specifically designed in such a way that takes into account the needs, opportunities and resources that young people have to engage in the deliberation."

- Alexander Georgiev, PanGea Bulgaria

Conclusion

Public participation is a vital component of participatory democracy. It is at the heart of democracy that citizens' concerns are the basis for change and that citizens have the possibility to take part in decision-making and to give impulse for change. In Bulgaria, youth participation is often seen as a "good to have" addition to the already minimal requirements for participation put in place. However, youth empowerment is growing and is demanding more and more accountability, transparency and engagement from public institutions. Young people have the right to participate effectively in the NECP revision process, demanding more information, time and opportunities to participate.

We therefore want to tell Bulgarian youth: come together and call Bulgaria to fulfil its obligations under the Governance Regulation and involve the youth meaningfully and effectively in shaping the future of the country!

This report is part of a larger mapping of youth involvement in the drafting of the NECPs. We are also in the process of publishing reports from Italy, Bulgaria and Greece.

You can find the rest of the reports at yeenet.eu



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Written by Legal Seeds, a project part of Youth and Environment Europe

Legal Seeds aims to empower young people to engage in climate- and environmental litigation through legal education, peer support, and capacity building. It also seeks to ensure youth participation in environmental decision-making processes, and advocate for the inclusion of youth perspectives in National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs)



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