

The unknown side of Greece: A visit to the country's valley of coal

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Lea Vranicar (WWF Germany)

Costas Poutakidis is not one to give up easily. As the chairman of the local community, he defends his home and its inhabitants – if worst comes to worst, up to the highest court of Greece. Even if that means facing the powerful Public Power Corporation PPC.

Costas' home is the small village of Akrini in northern Greece. While throngs of people visit the sun-soaked coasts of Greece, only a fraction will have come up here, or even heard of this part of the country. Akrini is part of Western Macedonia, the only region in Greece without any access to the sea, and home to Greece's coal mining industry.



Costas Poutakidis

Driving to Akrini means finding your way on roads that keep changing – depending on the hunger of the mines. In this unusual Greek valley, the landscape is characterized not by picturesque olive orchards or turquoise waters, but by large power plants and deep mines that cut into the ground and the lives of the people.

Like the ones in Akrini. The inhabitants here feel the consequences of coal mining more than others do. Their ground water is polluted with large amounts of hexavalent chromium: 120 micrograms per litre were measured here, a lot more than the 50 micrograms per litre the European Union sets as its limit and even more than the 100 microgram limit in the US – and mind, these limits are for the total amount of chromium, not just hexavalent. “The European laws should be honoured”, Costas tells the group of visitors that came here as part of [a WWF-project for Just Transition](#) in Eastern and Southern Europe [within the European climate Initiative EUKI](#).

It is this environmental pollution that caused the village to sue PPC. Costas claims that the high chromium levels in the water are directly related to PPC openly depositing ashes of the burning processes in the lignite plants. When rain washes through them,

harmful components can find their way deep into the ground. Just recently, an analysis published in a prominent scientific journal backed Costas and his allies. In 2007, as part of a mandatory study under new environmental regulations, PPC already noted high levels of chromium, Costas says. But this result was not revealed. Only in 2013 did a public test officially confirm the pollution.

“Of course we don’t want PPC to go bankrupt”, Costas says. He knows and honours the economic advantages PPC brought to the area, like the thousands of well-paid jobs. In total, about 10.000 people in Greece still work in the coal industry. But Costas insists the company has to follow the rules. And even here, where coal is all around, the people know that technology is moving on, away from coal towards renewables like solar – a no-brainer in sunny Greece. PPC will have to keep up with the progress and the international demands derived from combating climate change.

Right now, the share of power derived from coal lies at 28 percent in Greece, down from 80 percent in the mid 90’s. 14 coal units are operating – 8 fewer than 2010. The decrease does not stem from a wish to protect the climate, however. Greece’s climate goal for 2020 is weak, the one for 2030 still under debate. The change is purely driven by costs, with several EU directives forcing PPC to spend more money on lignite than they were willing to pay. But even though coal is becoming increasingly expensive and uncompetitive, villages are still being demolished for the sake of mining and a new power plant is built, Ptolemaida V, funded by the German export credit agency Euler-Hermes, backed by the German reconstruction loan corporation KfW.

Tassos Emmanouil can see the new plant from his lookout on top of one of the many hills surrounding the valley of coal. And his former home. His village, Mavropigi, is nestled on a little outskirts of the hill, surrounded on three sides by the mine. Soon, it too will be subsumed by it. “People already started having problems with their buildings from 2000 onwards, because the mine was getting close”, Tassos says. They started talking about leaving and PPC started buying land. In 2013 came a regulation that stated the people of Mavropigi had to sell their land. From the 800 former inhabitants, only two families still live there. The mine has crept closer, overtaking more and more of Mavropigi. All that remains of the local church is the front gate.



Tassos still comes here daily to feed his dog that roams the street of the ghost town. He says it drives him crazy that soon all his memories will be lost. He peeks through the window of a café that his father owned: Protest banners are still stacked against the wall. A symbol of a lost fight, but one that is not even over: A new court ruling set the price per square metre that PPC paid the owners at about half of what it was before. Now PPC wants the money back. “But the people have already spent it on their new houses”, Tassos says.

While Mavropigi will be dust soon, in the nearby town of Anargyroi, the dust has only just settled. Last year, a three-kilometre stretch of street collapsed. Now it just ends abruptly into the mine. There are also huge gaps in the remaining part of the street, and cracks in many of the buildings. While PPC pays the rent of about 200 people, who were directly affected by the landslide and had to relocate from their houses, financing the estimated 40 million Euro resettlement of the rest of the inhabitants is still

debated. A committee formed by the Ministry of Environment concluded that natural causes are responsible for the damages. Most people do not believe that. After all, while the mine gnawed at one side of the village, ashes from the power plants were dropped on the elevated other side, thus increasing the pressure on the underlying soil.



Mavropigi

Akrini, Mavropigi, Anargyroi – three villages still facing huge challenges, all related to an industry that is rapidly declining. Which opens up even more questions about the future of the entire region. When the coal-related activities in Western Macedonia end due to their increasing costs, what comes next? As much as the inhabitants of the three villages suffered under the mining and burning of coal, there is anxiety in the population about what happens to the region if the state owned PPC does not navigate itself well through the transition to other energy sources. While coal caused many problems, it is still an essential economic factor of the region. However, it's inevitable that this needs to change, because of the economic and scientific necessity to end coal, it being the single biggest source of global warming.

Lefteris Ioannidis, the mayor of the region's capitol city Kozani, initiated a new discussion platform, the Forum of Mayors, to address the necessary transition, and to make this transition fair not only for the people whose livelihoods depend on coal, but everyone. The first meeting coincided with the visit of the EUKI delegations from Bulgaria, Germany and Poland in September. Despite recent progress, currently not all stakeholders are on the same page, with some unionists still arguing for prolonging the life of coal for decades to come. It will take more meetings to find and agree on solutions, but it is a first step within the EUKI project and the Forum of Mayors to bring important stakeholders of coal regions together.

While the debate will carry on, others are already moving forward, establishing new economic models for the hopefully soon to be former coal region of Western Macedonia. There is a vineyard producing 600.000 bottles of Greek wine per year. A nearby factory distills organic oils and produces dried herbs and newly patented medicine for bees. "At the beginning people thought we were crazy, opening such a factory in the coal country", sales manager Christos Itskos says. Now he exports their products to other European countries, the US and Australia.

Right now, these entrepreneurs are only a fraction of business in Western Macedonia. But with the will and the support of national and local governments, universities, unions, NGOs and civil society, and by embracing clean energy as both a way to offset devastating climate change and stimulate economic development, just transition to sustainable business models is possible in Greece, Europe and beyond.

Photos and text by Lea Vranicar