

Case study

Promoting green jobs along the Bulgarian Green Belt



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Summary

A case study on green jobs in Bulgaria has been carried out by the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation in cooperation with EuroNatur as part of the EU-funded BESTbelt project. The case study aims to assess the potential for green jobs along the European Green Belt in Bulgaria and to identify steps to realize this potential. The study focused on three Bulgarian regions: the Strandzha Mountains, the Western Stara Planina Mountains, and the Belasitsa Mountains. Methods included field research with stakeholder interviews and local forums, and desk research assessing socioeconomic development. Key findings indicate several shared but also individual challenges for each region. A general challenge is the population decline in rural areas, particularly among educated individuals, leading to a labor shortage that hinders local businesses. Other challenges include political, economic, and demographic pressures, as well as specific regional issues such as infrastructure damage, legal obstacles, and lack of marketing coordination. Despite these challenges, some sectors hold significant potential for green jobs, for instance in green manufacturing and sustainable tourism. The capital of Bulgaria, Sofia, as a consumption center, offers business opportunities for local enterprises. Cultural events can also promote the region and its practices. In addition, the secondary sector provides employment opportunities that are not detrimental to the region's nature. In conclusion, while there are challenges, the study highlights substantial opportunities for sustainable development and economic growth through green jobs along the European Green Belt in Bulgaria and it formulates tangible recommendations on different levels for implementing green jobs.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and purpose of the case study

The case study on green jobs in Bulgaria has been carried out by the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation in cooperation with EuroNatur from December 2023 to January 2025 as part of the [EU-funded BESTbelt project](#), focusing on the European Green Belt. Today, the area formerly known as the Iron Curtain, which once divided Eastern and Western Europe, is Europe's longest green network, stretching from the Barents Sea in the north to the Adriatic and Black Seas in the south. The European Green Belt hosts and connects a vast number of unique and highly valuable natural areas, forming the backbone of the EU's green infrastructure. In addition to habitat protection and restoration, the European Green Belt Initiative aims to increase green job opportunities in the rural areas it crosses and to commemorate European history while bridging ecological, cultural and geographical borders along the former Iron Curtain to ensure a safe and sustainable future for the European Green Belt.

The case study aimed at exploring the opportunities for creating green jobs on the ground, developing specific ideas and actions on the local level, assessing factors of success as well as challenges for turning the identified potential into reality, and developing recommendations for different policy levels. The case study builds upon the previous report "[Comprehensive analysis of the potential of sustainable jobs along the European Green Belt and its valorisation](#)", carried out by Trinomics in 2023. According to the analysis, sustainable or green jobs in relation to the European Green Belt can be defined as *"jobs [...] that avert climate change and environmental degradation and, at the same time, contribute to social development and delivery of decent work for all."*¹ The term is further refined into direct and indirect green jobs:

Direct green jobs

- Directly contribute to the conservation and restoration of ecosystems along the European Green Belt.
- Examples: Jobs in nature conservation, sustainable forest management or organic agriculture.

Indirect green jobs

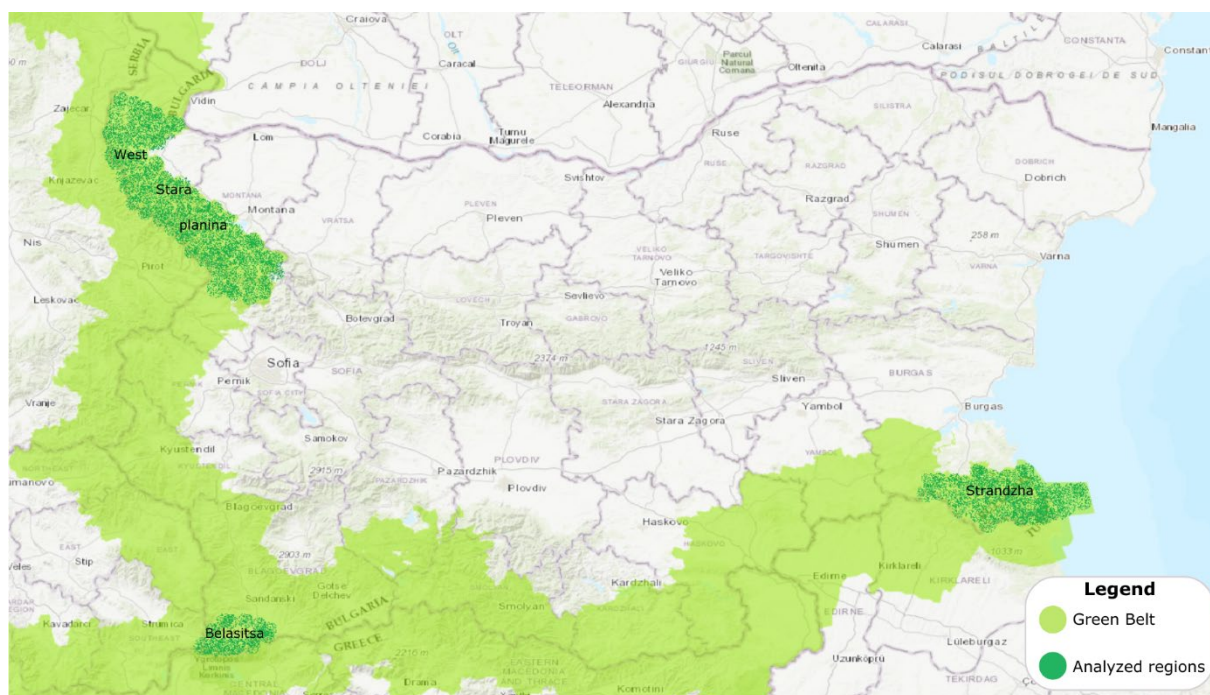
- Created because of the existence of the European Green Belt and have no detrimental impacts on the environment.
- Examples: Jobs in eco-tourism, sales of local products.

¹ Source: Comprehensive analysis of the potential of sustainable jobs along the European Green Belt and its valorisation - Final Report, 2023

Most parts of the European Green Belt in Bulgaria pass through mountain terrain and protected areas including Natura 2000 sites and have a very high potential for creating green jobs, e.g. directly in nature conservation but also in sustainable businesses. The case study sheds light on three regions, which were selected based on previous work of the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation: The Strandzha Mountains at the border with Turkey in the southeast, the Western Stara Planina Mountains at the border with Serbia in the northwest, and the Belasitsa Mountains at the borders with Greece and North Macedonia in the southwest.

2. Profiles of the case study regions

The map shows the location of the three study regions in Bulgaria, indicating their placement within the spatial scope of the European Green Belt.



Map 1: Base map from MapChart, overlay: European Green Belt spatial scope and case study municipalities. Prepared by the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation.

Case study region 1: Western Stara Planina

(7 municipalities + 5 municipalities with only part of their territory belonging to Western Stara Planina)

Protection status

Natura 2000 sites cover most of the territory, some smaller protected areas, such as reserves (IUCN category I), protected sites (IUCN category IV), and natural monuments (IUCN category III).

Regional challenges

- The protected areas small and poorly managed.
- Large region without a common marketing approach and concept for sustainable development.
- Lack of coordination to develop a common brand/vision for the region as a tourism destination.
- Strong depopulation and lack of human resources for tourism facilities and agriculture.
- Competition from non-certified and therefore illegal accommodation.
- Pressure on the environment, e.g. deforestation of old-growth forests, intended gold mining, conversion of natural habitats into solar parks, lack of capacity/commitment/awareness among institutions/ stakeholders/communities.

Green job potential in Western Stara Planina

- Some local green businesses exist, but ecotourism is underdeveloped
- Education levels are comparably high
- Vicinity to Bulgaria's capital Sofia leads to migration of rural population but also offers green jobs opportunities, e.g. day tourism, selling of regional products.



Figure 2: Hot air balloons over farmland. (c) Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation



Figure 3: Winery in Stara Planina. © Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation

Case study region 2: Belasitsa

(1 municipality)

Protection status

Belasitsa Nature Park (IUCN category VI), including the categories reserve (IUCN category I) and protected site (IUCN category IV), partially covers the Municipality of Petric. Beyond the Nature Park, there are natural monuments (IUCN category III) and protected areas (IUCN category IV). The **Natura 2000** site overlaps with the Nature Park in its entirety. Further Natura 2000 sites are situated in the municipality of Petric.

Regional challenges

- Lack of young labor force.
- Lack of local markets for the sale of local products, products mainly sold by resellers.
- Lack of signposting of hiking routes and therefore low development of outdoor infrastructure.
- Limited capacity of the Nature Park Directorate.
- Unsustainable practices of chestnut and blueberry picking and tree felling.
- Old and limited image of the region as a historical region with many wineries, lack of recognition of the region's mountains and local traditions by the municipality, and lack of communication between the municipality and local tourism businesses.

Green job potential in Belasitsa

- Spa tourism, green agriculture (especially for residents of Sofia), outdoor tourism, historic sites
- Regional agriculture benefits from climatic conditions and fertile soils
- Basic infrastructure is well-developed.



Figure 4: Foil tunnel with greens. (c) Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation



Figure 5: Agrotourism in Belasitsa. © Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation

Case study region 3: Strandzha

(2 municipalities)

Protection status

The **Strandzha Nature Park (IUCN category VI)** covers the entire municipality of Malko Tarnovo and most of the municipality of Tsarevo. The Nature Park includes reserves (IUCN category I), protected areas (IUCN category IV) and natural monuments (IUCN category III). The **Natura 2000** site overlaps almost completely with the territory of the Nature Park but adds the protection of an extensive marine area. The Uzunbudzhak Biosphere Reserve coincides with the territory of the Malko Turnovo Municipality.

Regional challenges

- Severe regional depopulation and lack of basic infrastructure.
- Reoccurring floods partly destroy livelihoods.
- Increasing immigration is challenging for the region's tourism potential (accommodation occupied by border police, littering because of missing management, loss of attractiveness for national and international tourists, etc.).
- Limited capacity of the Nature Park Directorate.
- Some Natura 2000 regulations create challenges for local farmers and decrease their income without adequate compensation by Common Agricultural Policy and/or national compensation instruments (e.g. regulation of grazing and mowing).
- Certification of local products requires strong efforts and is costly, while promising few benefits.
- Legal barriers to trade in local animal products.
- Sustainable tourism activities are not supported on an institutional level.
- Skepticisms of the local population towards new project ideas.



Figure 6: Fascinating flora of Strandzha. (Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation)

Green job potential in Strandzha

- Efforts exist and previous successes were achieved through introducing a regional trademark.

3. Methods

The methods used in the case study regions included field and desk research, a local workshop in each region, and a national workshop.

Field research: The following five main stakeholder groups were identified through a stakeholder analysis:

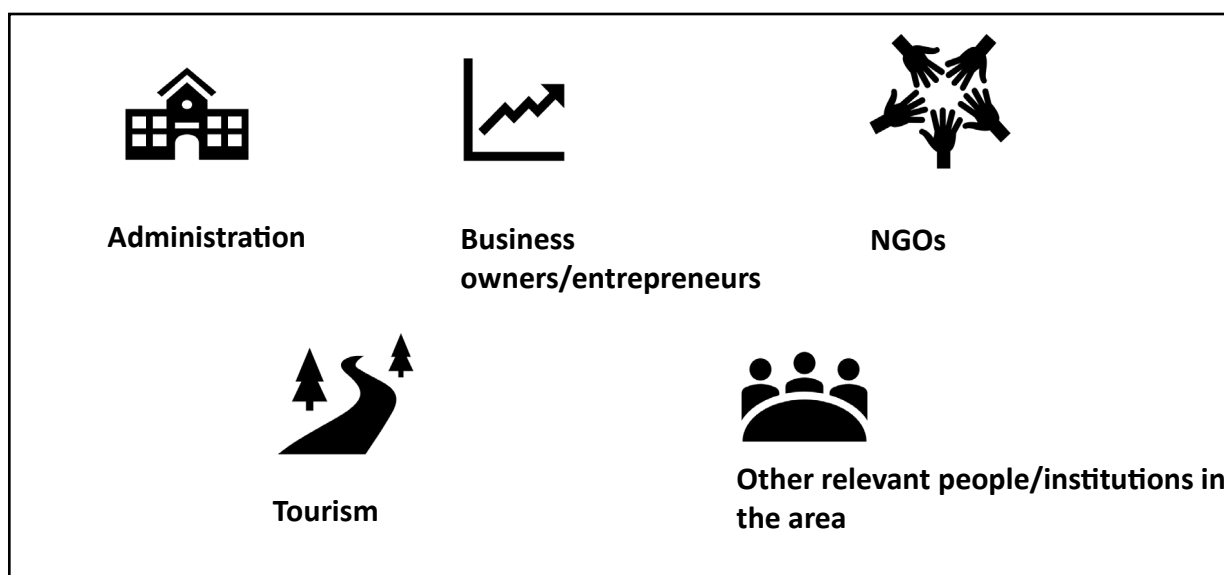


Figure 7: Important stakeholder groups for green jobs that were identified in the case study.

During the field trips, many of these stakeholders were interviewed to understand the specific challenges for green jobs in each region. Another important element of the fieldwork was to identify the best practice examples of green jobs in each of the case study regions.

Desk research: The desk research has been performed by an economist expert, who assessed the socioeconomic development of the three study regions, based on data from various sources like the National Statistical Institute, the Employment Agency and the Ministry of Regional Development.

Following the visits and interviews of the field research, stakeholders were invited to the local fora (one in each case study region²). The aim of the local fora was to present the European Green Belt Initiative and the findings from field research and to provide a platform for exchange and discussion on green jobs in the region. While many of the interviewed local stakeholders were very open to sharing their perspectives and interaction was high, they had limited capacities and timely resources to join the local fora. A national workshop on green

² A total number of 40 people participated in the local fora.

jobs along the European Green Belt in Bulgaria was organized to conclude the case study. The purpose of the national workshop was to summarize and discuss the outcomes of the local fora, stimulate thinking on the national level and derive recommendations for increasing green job opportunities along the European Green Belt.

4. Main challenges and potentials for green jobs in the study regions

The main challenges for implementing green jobs are the missing labor force in many rural areas and the largely untapped potential for sustainable manufacturing and sustainable tourism.

4.1. Population numbers and labor force

Almost all the 15 municipalities assessed in the European Green Belt area are experiencing population decline, particularly among educated and skilled people leaving rural areas. Unemployment rates in the studied municipalities are slightly higher than the national average. The core problem appears to be a lack of labor supply, which is preventing local businesses and potential investors from thriving or expanding. The secondary sector, especially the extractive industry, the energy and construction sector, and the water supply, provide employment opportunities (especially high numbers for Western Stara Planina). This sector cannot be considered green as such but helps to secure local livelihoods and can, if performed sustainably, benefit from the primary resources of the region without overexploiting them. Data on sources of employment from 2019 for four³ of the municipalities studied shows a low employment rate in the agricultural, forestry and fishery sectors. The reasons could be the existence of a large informal agricultural sector in place and the untapped potential in these sectors.

4.2. Potential of sustainable manufacturing

Manufacturing is the most dominant employment sector and can be understood as a green job under certain circumstances. All studied municipalities have significant potential for sustainable manufacturing. Manufacturing can be considered sustainable if the following key elements are applied: 1) Use of local primary resources (canning based on local fruits and vegetables, processing of milk and meat from grazing animals, drying and packaging of local mushrooms and herbs, furniture made from sustainably produced wood, etc.), 2) Relying predominantly on local labor, 3) Does not put pressure on the local environment beyond its renewable potential.

³ A total number of 40 people participated in the local fora.

4.3. Potential of sustainable tourism

The health sector offers important linkages to sustainable tourism that, for instance, capitalizes on thermal waters. However, the low employment rate (slightly above 10% of the total employment) through hotels and restaurants shows that the role of tourism in the municipalities along the European Green Belt is currently not substantial and not strongly developed. Nevertheless, the tourism sector has the potential to provide valuable resources to local communities while encouraging people to preserve their natural and cultural heritage as economic assets. Small-scale tourism promotes diversity and communication, stimulates the creation of small businesses, and can be beneficial for the region's economic, social, and cultural development, and for nature conservation. Nevertheless, if not adequately managed, tourism can also have a destructive potential that negatively impacts nature through building new infrastructure, and increased influx of visitors with all side effects like increased amounts of waste, sewage water etc.

5. Conclusions and recommendations on green jobs in Bulgaria

Many regions along the Bulgarian Green Belt have valuable primary resources like water, timber, fertile agricultural land, Mediterranean climate, beautiful landscapes, etc. In some of these regions, basic infrastructure and manufacturing bases do exist. Yet, new impulses are needed to reactivate the region's potential for productivity and their recognition. Strandzha, for instance, suffered from severe depopulation in the last two decades resulting in a lack of labor force. In addition, new geopolitical realities (especially migration on the Southeast border) pose new challenges for border regions. The Bulgarian Green Belt regions could be strengthened by showcasing their potential for green jobs and through joint marketing and promotion.

1. Challenge: Lack of labor force

There is a severe lack of labor force in the rural areas of Bulgaria, e.g. Strandzha. Currently, this is also the main reason for low investment activities in these regions.

Recommendations

- Upgrade green jobs by offering adequate remuneration to increase the attractiveness of the region by providing jobs that secure local livelihoods.
- Increase green jobs' availability by initiating new large-scale nature conservation and restoration programs. This can offer attractive jobs and contribute to socio-economic regional development.

- Development actors (economic, social and environmental authorities responsible for planning and development of opportunities for job creation and policies on the topic) need to be addressed with key arguments to follow this recommendation.

Policy level: International EU level, national governmental.

2. Challenge: Lack of skills

Some municipalities in rural areas still have large populations. However, they lack an educated and skilled labor force.

Recommendations:

- Offer training and guidance for municipalities on how to stimulate and create green jobs in the region.
- Train local stakeholders in setting up businesses in the sustainability sector.
- Develop education programs to increase knowledge and competencies in nature conservation and habitat restoration.

Policy level: International, EU, national, regional (Governmental Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations) and local.

3. Challenge: Underestimated potential of green jobs

The potential for green jobs in Bulgarian rural areas along the European Green Belt is not yet recognized.

Recommendations

- Make the sustainable development of rural areas a national priority and provide adequate expertise and financial resources.
- National, regional and local authorities should identify region-specific potentials for green jobs and actively promote them.
- Develop and actively implement strategies and plans to create green jobs, highlighting the potential of the Bulgarian Green Belt areas for sustainable development.
- Include requirements for creating green jobs into national and EU-wide financing programs targeting local enterprises at the Bulgarian Green Belt.
- Present existing green jobs potential to the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, its Agency of Labor, and the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works.

- Create new green jobs in sustainable forestry and farming, green manufacturing, and sustainable nature-based tourism to stimulate the development of these sectors.

Policy level: EU, national, and regional level.

4. Challenge: Untapped potential of municipalities near Sofia

Bulgaria's capital, Sofia is a powerful consumer center that offers opportunities for local businesses in regions such as Belasitsa or Western Stara Planina. Sofia is a potential market for products of local farmers. In addition, tourists from Sofia can easily reach nearby regions, which can use this potential by offering tourism options. Sofia also provides easy access to a wide range of administrative, financial and other services.

Recommendations

- Expand existing and establish new farmers markets.
- Do dedicated marketing of local products and services from European Green Belt areas.
- Increase and diversify tourism offers including outdoor tourism, gourmet and wine tourism, spa and recreation tourism for tourists from Sofia.
- Support networking between restaurants and producers from European Green Belt areas.

Policy level: National and regional.

5. Challenge: Low capacities of Nature Park Directorates

The human and financial resources of many Nature Park Directorates are often limited. Their staff and local experts are poorly paid and must manage projects with low operating budgets, which reduces the capacity for sustainable local development. At the same time, the Nature Park Directorates provide green jobs.

Recommendations

- The Ministry of Agriculture and Food should support the Nature Park Administrations under their authority politically and financially.
- Establish a separate State Agency on Protected Areas and Natura 2000 with an adequate budget and status.
- Increase staff of Nature Park Administrations.

Policy level: National.

6. Challenge: Limitations of existing green job best practices

Most of the existing green job best practices along the Bulgarian Green Belt are small-scale. In addition, they suffer from unproportionally high political, fiscal, regulatory, economic, and demographic pressures.

Recommendations

- EU and national subsidies and programs must consider regional particularities and explicitly include creating green jobs.
- Provide the necessary support to local farmers to run their sustainable businesses harmoniously with existing Natura 2000 regulations.
- Support local (mainly seasonal) businesses in rural areas on their way to building sustainable and well-established businesses through tax incentives.

Policy level: National and regional.

7. Challenge: Underdeveloped potential of green manufacturing

The potential for good green jobs in relation to the sustainable processing of local resources (timber, agriculture, etc.) is only partially tapped in. Modern green manufacturing has the potential to increase the region's value and economic power while working resources efficiently and environmentally friendly and to attract skilled labor forces.

Recommendations

- Raise awareness of the value of local primary resources and the potential for green jobs.
- Strengthen the local and regional portfolio in the green manufacturing sector to attract companies.

8. Challenge: The natural and cultural values of the Bulgarian Green Belt are not well-known

The Bulgarian Green Belt is not yet well known in terms of the natural and cultural values it offers. Especially, the potential for recreation and sustainable tourism is not promoted sufficiently.

Recommendations

- Promote the European Green Belt as an essential initiative to protect nature along the Bulgarian Green Belt and as attractive destination for sustainable tourism.
- Create joint visibility and identity, develop and implement regional trademarks with specific criteria.
- The Ministry of Tourism should establish a calendar on bulgariatravel.org that promotes regional and local events, to inform and attract visitors.
- Proclaim new large, protected areas and promote their international recognition, e.g. under UNESCO, as World Heritage/MAB Biosphere Reserves/Global Geoparks to protect and promote the regions' natural values.
- Organize cultural events like festivals or exhibitions with local communities as a powerful for promoting the region, its products and good practices.
- Promote good practices through the European Green Belt community, NGOs like the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation, Park Administrations, municipalities, local/regional state structures.

Policy level: National and regional.