

1.

All over the world, people living near fossil fuel deposits often face pressure to make room for more extraction. Whether it is shale [gas in Argentina](#), [oil in Albania](#), [coal in Mongolia](#) or [lignite in Serbia](#), local residents may lose their homes or livelihoods. If they protest, they are too easily portrayed as being in the way of progress, as opposing the national development and – even worse – the nation’s energy security.

An ongoing debate over coal mining limits in the Czech Republic shows that also in countries of the European Union local communities are facing similar struggles. It also illustrates how “securing energy supply” has become a catch-all argument even when the energy demand in no way justifies it.

Coal mining limits in the Czech Republic

Since the early 1990s limits to coal mining are protecting dwellings in the North Bohemia against demolition. A government decree from 1991 guarantees to the towns and villages that are situated on coal deposits that they will not be pulled down to make room for mining.

Yet this might change soon. In July the Czech government is to decide on a possible extension of mining. As part of its Energy and Raw Materials Strategy, the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade opened (once again) a discussion about lifting the coal mining limits. The Ministry has prepared four scenarios of resolving the issue of mining limits – an entire lifting of the limits, their entire preservation and two options with a partial lifting of limits (of which one would have an effect on populated dwellings and one would not).

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2.

While [a majority of Czechs](#), local inhabitants, environmental NGOs and part of the political establishment are opposing the plans, energy companies who own the mines and the miners’ trade unions are for lifting the mining limits. Their arguments are that the Czech Republic will need more coal for its energy demand (mainly heating) and that hundreds of miners would face unemployment if the limits remained.

Feeble arguments

The arguments of the plans’ proponents are as predictable as they are weak. While it is always difficult to argue against securing miners’ employment, it is worth pointing out that the villages and cities under risk by the mines employ more people than the mines themselves.

In particular the reference to energy demand, however, can hardly be taken seriously. The Czech Republic currently exports 16 million tons of coal annually in the form of electricity. And even the [Czech Republic’s new draft energy strategy](#) (pdf) confirms that the country does not need the coal behind the mining limits. According to the Strategy, coal consumption will drop by 73% until 2040, even though the Strategy does not take into account the whole energy savings potential.

Rather than just digging out more dirty coal, investments in energy efficiency would be a reliable way to moderate the energy demand. The [Czech economy is among the least efficient in the EU](#). The sole energy saving potential of residential houses is bigger than the amount of energy that could be extracted by lifting the coal mining limits.

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3.

#### Climate impacts and stranded assets

In case of an abolition of the limits, the Czech Republic would extract coal until the year 2120. This is in sharp contradiction with the goal of the [EU's Low Carbon Roadmap](#) (pdf) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 – 95% until 2050.

A 2015 UCL study published in [Nature](#) concluded that Europe must leave 89% of its coal deposits underground if the world is to limit global warming to below 2°C. The latest [IPCC's assessment report](#) (pdf) recommended reducing global emission to zero during the second half of the century and emission from fossil fuels even sooner.

If the government lifted the coal mining limits now it would itself stand in the way of progress – a progress towards a more climate-friendly future. More and more institutions are divesting from fossil fuels, not only for moral reasons, but because investments in fossil fuels may soon become [stranded assets](#).

To not fall behind, the Czech Republic needs a targeted and long-term plan on how to achieve a low carbon economy. Taking decisive action on energy efficiency measures would be an easy and effective first step – also for providing employment.

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4.

During the course of the 20th century, the [North Bohemian Basin](#), an area of over 1100 km<sup>2</sup>, was heavily mined from [Kadaň](#) to [Ústí nad Labem](#) for brown coal for burning in a large number of [thermal power stations](#), [electrical power stations](#) and [factories](#). In the 1970s and 1980s, the mining increased on a massive scale, and because of the expansion of mining operations whole villages, towns and even cities ([Most](#)) were demolished to extract the coal that lay beneath; <sup>[[Note 1](#)]</sup> their inhabitants were rehoused in large-scale new prefabricated [panelled apartment buildings](#).

The low quality technology used for large-scale burning of brown coal led to a sharp increase in the content of harmful [sulfur dioxide](#) and [aerosols](#) in the atmosphere. The result was wholesale damage to the environment (such as the die-back of the forests in the [Ore Mountains](#) from acid rain) and human health. In view of the unsustainable situation, the first post-communist Czechoslovak government decided to resolve the situation by introducing desulphurization and aerosol removal from major state-owned power plants, and the setting of limits which specific mines should not go beyond in future. In areas that had already been mined, support was also given to the reclamation of damaged landscape. The limits hence served as a government guarantee to North Bohemian communities that their environment would no longer continue to deteriorate and that their very existence has a long-term future, i.e. that it is worth purchasing property there, building and renovating houses, reconstructing roads and utilities, establishing businesses, etc.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brown\\_coal\\_mining\\_limits\\_in\\_North\\_Bohemia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brown_coal_mining_limits_in_North_Bohemia)