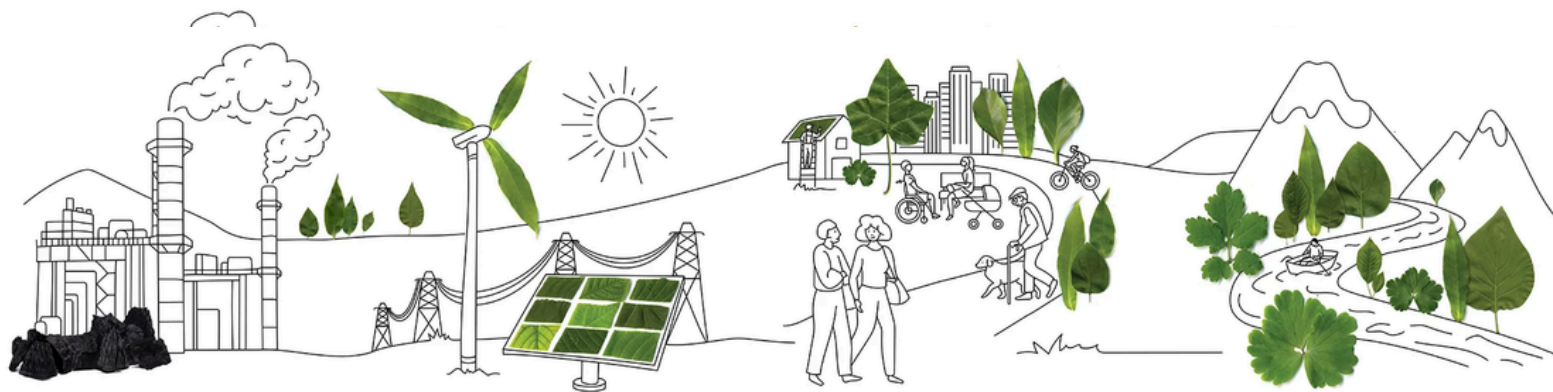


Annual Report 2024





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INTRODUCTION

2024 was a year of both challenges and significant achievements for Bankwatch Romania in our mission to promote sustainable environmental solutions. Amidst a complex election year for Romania, we remained actively engaged and influential in shaping environmental and energy policies, focusing our efforts on several key strategic directions.

First and foremost, we played a substantial role in climate and energy policy advocacy. We contributed to the revision of Romania's National Energy and Climate Plan and were selected as members of the working groups drafting the National Social Climate Plan and the partnership structure for post-2027 Cohesion Policy discussions—essential documents for Romania's sustainable future.

In the electoral context, we facilitated dialogue between civil society and candidates for the European Parliament. We organized a debate in collaboration with the Romanian Center for European Policies, the Natura 2000 Coalition Federation, and under the aegis of the European Economic and Social Committee. The outcomes of these discussions were compiled into a white paper later submitted to Romanian MEPs. Additionally, we hosted a webinar for young people from coal regions such as Gorj and the Jiu Valley, providing them with the opportunity to engage with experts on the implications of the presidential elections.

Throughout the year, we focused on two major fossil gas projects: Neptun Deep and the Anghel Saligny program. Regarding Neptun Deep, we participated in public debates in Romania and Bulgaria, highlighting concerns about climate and biodiversity impacts, as well as misleading claims about the project's benefits. A Greenpeace report we supported revealed that the project would generate approximately 200 million tons of CO₂ emissions over its lifetime—equivalent to a quarter of Romania's total emissions in 2035.

Regarding the Anghel Saligny program, which allocates €2.6 billion for fossil gas distribution until 2028, we conducted a detailed analysis showing that none of the 800+ projects underwent proper environmental impact assessments. Their completion would increase Romania's gas consumption by one-third, generating around 7 million additional tons of CO₂ emissions. We also identified significant economic risks, including rising gas prices and the long-term financial unviability of these investments.

In March 2024, we published a report on fossil gas projects funded through the Modernization Fund (€15 billion), focusing on the Turceni power plant and the Tuzla-Podișor gas pipeline. We engaged with the European Commission and the Ministry of Energy to push for a reduction in these funds allocated to fossil fuels. In October, we presented our concerns to Fund representatives, pointing out the lack of investment in energy efficiency, limited transparency, and insufficient involvement of social partners in program development.

Supporting local communities in coal regions remained a core focus of our work. We monitored environmental quality, provided legal assistance, and facilitated dialogue between communities and authorities in Turceni, Alunu, and areas affected by the Ișalnița and CET Craiova power plants—acting as a bridge between citizens and responsible institutions.

In the field of sustainable energy, we promoted alternative heating systems, showcasing success stories like Beiuș, where district heating operates exclusively on geothermal energy. We also supported municipal involvement in energy projects, such as facilitating a collaboration between Oradea authorities and a Spanish local administration to explore innovative heating models. Additionally, we identified and promoted funding opportunities for renewable-based district heating, helping the Rovinari municipality apply for a study on the area's geothermal potential. Furthermore, we published a key study on tackling energy poverty in Petroșani, proposing solutions based on energy efficiency and renewables.

We continued to defend the right to a healthy environment and civic space for environmental NGOs in Romania. We organized the “Access to Justice and the Shrinking Space for Environmental NGOs” conference, attended by UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders Michel Forst, and published the report “Environmental Law in Romania: Analysis and Solutions.” Facing increasing pressure, we took decisive action, filing a complaint with the European Commission against the Romanian authorities’ intimidation of civil society and challenging controversial hydropower projects at Răstolița and in the Jiu Gorge in court.

In March, we concluded the “Challenges of Energy Transition in Romania” project, a three-year initiative funded by the Active Citizens Fund. This project addressed key challenges in transforming the national energy system through strategic and multidimensional interventions. It played a crucial role in improving Romania’s legislative framework for renewable energy and environmental protection by actively participating in public consultations on national strategic plans, organizing expert debates and conferences with government representatives, and monitoring public policies.



The project's impact materialized in higher national renewable energy targets, the successful promotion of the just transition concept in Gorj County, reaching over 3 million people through media campaigns, and establishing Romania's first Environmental Law Clinic. This clinic brought together over 25 professionals and significantly strengthened legal environmental protections. As part of the project, we also collaborated with 2Celsius to produce Romania's first interactive web documentary on Gorj County's transition to climate neutrality.

In 2024, we developed new tools to enhance public engagement, including our new website—a modernized platform that improves access to information about our initiatives and campaigns. In September, we launched "Collective Renovation: A Comic Book on Local Change" to highlight that the first step in the energy transition is improving home energy efficiency—and that it starts with us, informed citizens. The project provided practical guidance on available funding sources and how to access them.



FOSSIL GAS CAMPAIGN

Neptun Deep – Environmental and climate impact



The public consultation process for the environmental permit of the Neptun Deep offshore gas exploitation began in December 2023, and the permit was issued in June 2024. During this period, we participated in two public debates—one in Tuzla, Romania, and one in Kavarna, Bulgaria—where we highlighted concerns regarding the project's impact on climate and biodiversity. Among the key issues we raised were misleading claims about the project's supposed positive climate impact, risks to marine biodiversity, and the lack of access to a detailed risk assessment for potential accidents.

We also engaged in international events to raise awareness about the consequences of the Neptun Deep project. At the People's Conference in Vienna, where activists from around the world gathered to protest against fossil gas, and at the OMV Annual General Meeting, we joined forces with Austrian civil society to inform shareholders about the project's impact on Romania and the region.

To support our position with concrete evidence, we backed Greenpeace's report on the greenhouse gas emissions of Neptun Deep, which was released in March 2024. Conducted by independent international researchers, the report revealed that the project would generate approximately 200 million tons of CO₂ over its lifetime—more than 10 million tons per year, surpassing the current emissions of Romania's coal industry. Moreover, these emissions, primarily resulting from burning fossil gas, would account for one-quarter of Romania's total emissions in 2035, though it remains unclear if they were included in national calculations.

Despite these alarming figures, the environmental permit for Neptun Deep was granted in June 2024. But the fight is far from over.





Gas distribution networks under the Anghel Saligny Program

The Anghel Saligny National Investment Program is set to finance fossil gas distribution with €2.6 billion until 2028. Given the scale of the program, we analyzed its economic and environmental impact. With over 800 projects financed across the country, we reviewed a selection and found that none included an adequate environmental impact assessment or an estimation of greenhouse gas emissions compared to current levels.

Based on projected consumption estimates, we found that if all the projects are completed, Romania's gas consumption will increase by one-third, leading to an additional 7 million tons of CO₂ emissions per year. We also highlighted the risk of higher gas prices due to the introduction of the EU's ETS2 carbon pricing system, as well as the long-term financial risk of stranded assets.

The Modernization Fund financing fossil gas

In March 2024, we published a report analyzing fossil gas projects in Romania that are financed through the Modernization Fund, the country's largest energy transition fund, totaling €15 billion. At that time, Romania had already secured approval for five fossil gas projects worth approximately €500 million, with additional funding continuing to flow toward gas infrastructure.

Our report focused on two specific investments: the Turceni gas power plant and the Tuzla-Podișor gas pipeline, highlighting critical shortcomings in their emissions reduction strategies. We engaged in discussions with both the European Commission and the Romanian Ministry of Energy to explore ways to reduce funding for projects that will significantly increase fossil gas consumption and emissions, exacerbating climate change.

In October, we also participated in a meeting with representatives of the Modernization Fund, where we emphasized the lack of investments in energy efficiency and sustainable heating solutions, which could be supported by this fund instead. Additionally, we raised concerns about transparency gaps within the national ministry and the lack of engagement with social partners in the fund's program development.



ENERGY TRANSITION CAMPAIGN



Throughout 2024, we continued to advocate for transparent decision-making, public participation, and the implementation of sustainable solutions in climate and energy transition policies. By actively engaging in consultation and decision-making processes, we ensured that the voices of civil society and affected communities were heard and integrated into public policies.

One of our most significant efforts was contributing to the **revision of Romania's National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP)**. We participated in the public consultations organized during this process, submitting well-researched comments and recommendations alongside other environmental organizations. We also closely monitored the consultation process to ensure transparency and public engagement. Given the initially short and non-transparent consultation period, we responded with a public letter demanding an extension. In response, the government extended the consultation period to two months and organized in-person meetings.

Together with Greenpeace, WWF, 2Celsius, and Declic, we submitted our observations and made them public. As environmental NGOs, we called for reduced investments in fossil gas, highlighting the unacknowledged rise in gas consumption in the NECP. We pushed for more ambitious renewable energy targets, as well as concrete objectives for a just transition, energy poverty reduction, and energy communities.

The final version of the NECP was published in September. Compared to the previous version, the target for renewable energy increased to 38%, but it still falls short of the European Commission's recommendation of 41%. While this increase is a positive step, it underscores the need for further efforts to align with long-term decarbonization goals. The plan also places a greater emphasis on individual heat pumps, energy storage, and renewable gases such as biogas and biomethane. However, contrary to our recommendations, the installed capacity of gas power plants was increased.

The use of hydrogen and other renewable gases in power plants was reduced to 50%, which represents a partial victory but also raises uncertainties about the future role of fossil gas. Despite this, concerns about expanding fossil gas use were acknowledged in the final NECP.



Beyond the NECP revision process, we also participated in the selection of members for two key advisory bodies:

- **Thematic Working Groups** for the design and programming of the **National Social Climate Plan**
- The Partnership Structure for discussions on **post-2027 Cohesion Policy**

We were appointed as members of both structures, giving us the opportunity to contribute directly to the development of social and cohesion policies in the coming years. Our presence in these structures is crucial to ensure that environmental perspectives are prioritized and sustainability principles are integrated into funding and support measures, driving a fair and green transition.

Another major initiative was **the launch of our study on energy poverty solutions in the Municipality of Petroșani**. This study provides a comprehensive overview of energy poverty in the area, outlining the challenges faced by the local community. It also proposes concrete solutions based on energy efficiency measures and renewable energy use, presenting three detailed scenarios for modernizing the city's heating system.

The study was launched at a dedicated event, which served as a platform for dialogue and collaboration between authorities, experts, and local stakeholders, paving the way for a tailored strategy to address the community's specific needs.

These actions are part of our ongoing efforts to promote transparent and inclusive public policies that support a just energy transition and improve the quality of life in affected communities. Through active participation, close monitoring, and collaboration with key stakeholders, we ensure that policy development is guided by real community needs and sustainable development principles.



Launch event for the study on solutions to fight energy poverty in Petroșani.
Credit: Bankwatch Romania





JUST TRANSITION CAMPAIGN

Throughout 2024, we remained actively engaged in **advancing the Just Transition Program (JTP)**, despite persistent delays in its implementation. Our organization participated in the **two Monitoring Committee meetings held in Craiova and Galați**, where we consistently advocated for greater transparency in project selection and the improvement of communication channels. We raised concerns at both national and European levels through multiple advocacy meetings, addressing the nature of proposed changes and the transparency of the decision-making process.

In March, we organized a **visit to Gorj in connection with the launch of RenewAcad**, a training center for former mining workers in Rovinari. This visit included meetings with local authorities and NGOs to assess JTP implementation and explore potential collaborations. We supported the Gorj County Council and the BeTeen NGO in successfully submitting applications for the START and JTP Groundwork technical assistance programs. Throughout the year, we participated in documentation missions with the START delegation and internal coordination meetings. This process will conclude in March 2025 with a two-year work plan aimed at strengthening the capacity of the Working Group and developing strategic transition projects. As a result of our involvement, the Gorj County Council initiated a hiring process to enhance the capacity of its dedicated Just Transition unit.

In the first quarter, we supported potential beneficiaries of the JTP funding call for SMEs by **developing an explanatory brochure** that simplified key aspects of the call. In April, we took part in the **8th Just Transition Platform**, continuing our EU-level advocacy efforts to maintain the Just Transition Fund (JTF) in the next European funding period and to ensure more effective implementation of the current program.

In May, ahead of the European elections, we co-organized a **debate between civil society representatives and European Parliament candidates** in collaboration with the Natura 2000 Coalition, the Romanian Center for European Policies, and under the aegis of the European Economic and Social Committee. The debate focused on the future of the European Green Deal and the necessary measures to strengthen equity and social inclusion.



The event provided a platform for dialogue on the challenges of implementing Green Deal policies, the role of EU institutions in supporting the process, and the policy measures needed to ensure a fair and efficient green transition. The debate was well attended, featuring candidates from various political parties as well as decision-makers from civil society and local communities. The conclusions were structured into a White Paper and submitted to Romanian Members of the European Parliament.



The debate event between civil society representatives and European Parliament candidates. Credit: Bankwatch Romania

In July, we participated in the **Annual Political Dialogue in Slovenia**, where we contributed to discussions on the future of the JTF. Our growing interest in energy communities led us to collaborate with Greenpeace Romania and other local actors to raise awareness about the benefits of energy communities in just transition regions. Over the summer, we also initiated an effort to bring together County Councils from beneficiary regions to co-sign a letter urging the Managing Authority to unblock JTP implementation and convene the Monitoring Committee for in-person discussions.

In September, we translated and promoted in the Romanian press a policy statement released by CEE Bankwatch Network and 41 other civil society organizations, advocating for the continuation of the JTF.

We also supported BeTeen, a youth NGO from Gorj, in continuing the EU Teens4Green project and developing their JTP Groundwork technical assistance program initiative—a skills and green business hub for young people in the county.



Our collaboration with BeTeen materialized in several initiatives, including a **cycling competition** promoting green mobility, which attracted over 500 participants, and awareness campaigns on Just Transition in Gorj, such as **the screening of the *Beyond Coal* documentary** in rural areas. Additionally, we supported the organization of a youth and local stakeholder exchange program focused on green entrepreneurship, featuring successful incubators from other Romanian regions. We maintained constant communication with youth NGOs in Gorj through calls and regular meetings during documentation missions to ensure better coordination of activities.



Green Bike Race 2024 - Cycling competition to promote green mobility. Credit: Bankwatch Romania.



Screening of the *Beyond Coal* web-documentary in rural areas during Greenfest 2024. Credit: Bankwatch Romania.



Green Bike Race 2024 - Cycling competition to promote green mobility. Credit: Bankwatch Romania.



In December, we participated in the **Advocacy Week** organized by Bankwatch Network in Brussels, focusing on the future of the JTF in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Amidst the political crisis triggered by Romania's presidential elections, we organized a **webinar for young people from Gorj and the Jiu Valley**. This event provided youth with the opportunity to engage in an open dialogue with experts in sociology, political analysis, and disinformation, discussing the stakes and challenges of the presidential elections. The event was held in collaboration with Jiu Valley Society and BeTeen, attracting approximately 40 participants.

Throughout 2024, our organization remained committed to promoting Just Transition in Romania. Through advocacy, local engagement, capacity-building initiatives, and youth-focused activities, we worked to ensure transparency, facilitate access to funding opportunities, and support sustainable economic transformation in just transition regions. Looking ahead, we will continue to advocate for the effective implementation of JTP, the creation of a strong framework for energy communities, and closer collaboration among local, national, and European stakeholders.



MINING AND POWER PLANTS CAMPAIGN



Monitoring the decarbonization process and the coal phase-out timeline

Throughout 2024, the gradual phase-out of coal from the national energy mix remained marred by a lack of transparency and institutional coordination. Although we are part of the Advisory Committee on relevant aspects of the decarbonization program, no meetings were organized by the end of the year. We requested a meeting from both committee members and the Ministry of Economy but received only three responses from the 22 members contacted. According to the Ministry of Economy, the Interministerial Decarbonization Committee is responsible for scheduling the first Advisory Committee meeting. In response to this situation, we published an article highlighting the lack of transparency and efficiency in the decarbonization process.

Additionally, the Ministry of Energy promoted the idea of modifying the coal phase-out timeline for Complexul Energetic Oltenia (CEO) without any official communication on the matter by year-end. We requested information from CEO regarding its decarbonization plan and the status of its photovoltaic park projects but received no response.

Supporting communities affected by the coal industry

In February 2024, we conducted a visit to Turceni, where we facilitated a dialogue between the Submaidane neighborhood community and local authorities regarding access to potable water. The visit was followed by an article outlining the community's challenges and identified solutions. As a result, starting in June, Submaidane residents began benefiting from the potable water distribution system provided by the local administration.



We continued monitoring water quality in communities affected by mining. In Turceni, we conducted a second round of tests on the water supplied by the local administration. While no major issues were identified, residents remain skeptical about water quality.

In May, we notified the Environmental Guard about dust pollution from the slag and ash deposit of the Turceni power plant. The plant was sanctioned even before our complaint was submitted. We were informed that investments would be made in the deposit's watering system to prevent similar incidents.



Turceni 2024. Credit: Bankwatch România.

Throughout the year, we supported the community in Alunu, Vâlcea County. We provided feedback and informational notes to local and national authorities on various expansion projects and facilitated community access to legal expertise.

In Gorj, we filed a complaint with the Environmental Guard regarding the operation of the Ișalnița power plant, which, according to the coal phase-out plan, should be on reserve. We received confirmation that the unit was temporarily reactivated for energy production balancing, though there were periods when the desulfurization installation did not function optimally.

We organized a meeting with the community affected by pollution from CET Craiova, discussing legal support options. Additionally, we submitted a request for information to Craiova City Hall, as the power plant's pollution had also been reported to the European Commission.





Alunu, Vâlcea county. Credit: Bankwatch România.



District heating

In 2024, promoting sustainable alternatives to fossil fuel-based district heating systems remained an important topic on the local decision-makers' agenda, despite the involvement process being affected by the altered electoral calendar, which moved local elections from October to June. Nevertheless, we succeeded in maintaining dialogue with local administrations in several cities, facilitating exchanges of best practices and promoting funding sources for the modernization of urban heating systems.

One of our main activities was continuing to inform municipalities about the benefits of using renewable energy sources for district heating. We initiated discussions with representatives from the municipalities of Oradea, Beiuș, Rovinari, and Buteni, and in July, we organized a working visit to Beiuș, where the district heating system operates exclusively on geothermal energy. This visit provided a detailed perspective on the development of this system and the future plans of the local administration, information that we documented in an article published in December, focusing on geothermal projects in Bihor County. Additionally, we organized a working visit to Buteni, where local authorities presented the innovative projects they have been working on and future plans in the field of energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy resources.

In addition to field visits, we facilitated the involvement of municipalities in various projects and webinars. For example, thanks to our ongoing dialogue with the administration of Oradea, we facilitated a collaboration with a local administration in Spain to explore innovative district heating models.



Another key aspect of our work was identifying and promoting funding sources for renewable energy-based district heating. In Rovinari, we supported the local administration in applying for a grant to conduct a prefeasibility study on the use of geothermal resources in the area. The initial goal of this project is to connect energy-efficient renovated public buildings to a new centralized heating system, with the possibility of later expansion to residential buildings and commercial spaces. The evaluation results are expected between February and March 2025.

We continued to explore best practice models from Europe, having a preliminary discussion with the Danish company Innergi, specializing in geothermal energy extraction, to which we presented a summary of Romania's geothermal potential.

At the central level, we raised questions with officials from the Ministry of Energy regarding funding for sustainable district heating projects. We also initiated a dialogue with the Ministry of Development, with discussions scheduled for early 2025.

Throughout the year, we participated in several international events relevant to the district heating sector. At the end of the year, we attended the Euroheat & Power Summit in Brussels, where we interacted with experts and decision-makers in the field, promoting Romania's potential to integrate renewable energy sources into existing urban heating systems.

Through these actions, we contributed to maintaining and developing an active dialogue on sustainable alternatives for centralized district heating systems in Romania, despite the challenges imposed by the altered electoral calendar and the lack of a clear position from the central authorities.



ENVIRONMENTAL AND CIVIL LIBERTIES ADVOCACY



In 2024, as in previous years, Bankwatch Romania and other environmental organizations faced increasing pressure and intimidation while advocating for environmental protection and the public's right to a healthy environment.

Following a complaint filed in 2023 to the UN Special Rapporteur for environmental defenders, Michel Forst, he expressed a desire to visit Romania to better understand the issues we were facing. Thus, in February 2024, we hosted the conference "Access to Justice and the Shrinking Space for Environmental NGOs" in Bucharest, with the Special Rapporteur present. Forst expressed his support for environmental activists and journalists in Romania and stressed to Romanian authorities the importance of defending environmental rights without fear of harassment. The conference addressed the growing harassment and intimidation of environmental defenders through online channels, threats, and Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP).

However, attacks on civil society did not stop, and in December 2024, five environmental organizations, including Bankwatch Romania, filed a complaint with the European Commission regarding an intimidation campaign by the Romanian state authorities, centered on statements made by the Minister of Energy, Sebastian Burduja. The complaint was triggered by media reports about alleged criminal complaints filed by the ministry against environmental NGOs. The organizations requested that the European Commission examine Romania's compliance with EU environmental law and the Aarhus Convention, assess whether the described behavior creates obstacles to justice, and take measures to ensure that Romanian authorities refrain from undermining the rights of environmental defenders.

The report "Environmental Rights in Romania: Analysis and Solutions," published in March 2024, highlights legislative deficiencies and challenges faced by environmental defenders. Produced with the support of lawyer Cosmin Pleșcan and participants in the Environmental Law Clinic established by Bankwatch Romania in 2021, the report addresses issues such as state aid for polluting industries and the management of the energy transition by state-owned companies.



The report also examines the transposition of European directives into national legislation, particularly concerning the impact of micro-hydropower plants. Furthermore, it discusses the difficulties of accessing environmental information from state institutions and the lengthy procedures required to obtain such information.

Throughout the year, environmental organizations actively contested hydropower projects that pose a threat to ecosystems, particularly those included in the ecocide ordinance OUG 175/2022.

Together with colleagues from CEE Bankwatch Network, we submitted dozens of pages of comments highlighting issues with environmental impact assessment reports for hydropower projects in Răstolița and the Defileul Jiului. We also participated in public debates organized by environmental authorities, emphasizing our main concerns regarding the devastating impact of these two projects.

Unfortunately, APM Mureș completely ignored the comments submitted by us and other civil society members and rushed to issue the environmental permit without even respecting the legal consultation period regarding its content. Therefore, in December 2024, Bankwatch Romania and Declic filed a lawsuit to suspend and annul the environmental permit, pointing out an incomplete environmental impact assessment and procedural violations. We believe that APM Mureș grossly overstepped its authority, as the environmental permit was issued for all works remaining until the project's completion, even though the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) only analyzed the impact of deforestation required for filling the reservoir.

On the other hand, during the debates on the Livezeni-Bumbești project (in the Defileul Jiului), civil society representatives faced intimidation, frequent interruptions, insults, and threats. Along with NGOs from the Valea Jiului and Gorj, we sent a letter to the Ministry of the Environment in November, highlighting intimidation tactics and biased moderation during the project's debates. The letter showed that ministry representatives did not encourage participation and did not facilitate open dialogue, failing to provide a safe and impartial environment for all stakeholders to express their views freely. We also requested that the Ministry of the Environment organize a new round of public debates conducted transparently, in accordance with the Aarhus Convention, but this request was rejected by the authorities.



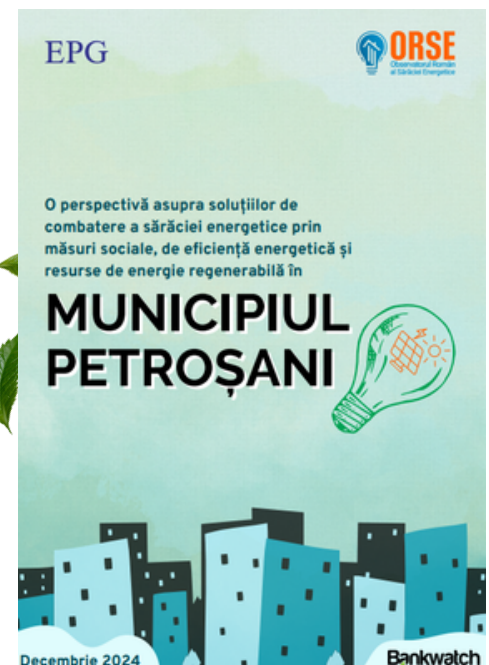
The Răstolița river, 2024. Credit: Bankwatch România.



REPORTS AND ANALYSES



Modernization Fund – An open door for fossil gas in Romania



A perspective on solutions to fight energy poverty in the Municipality of Petroșani

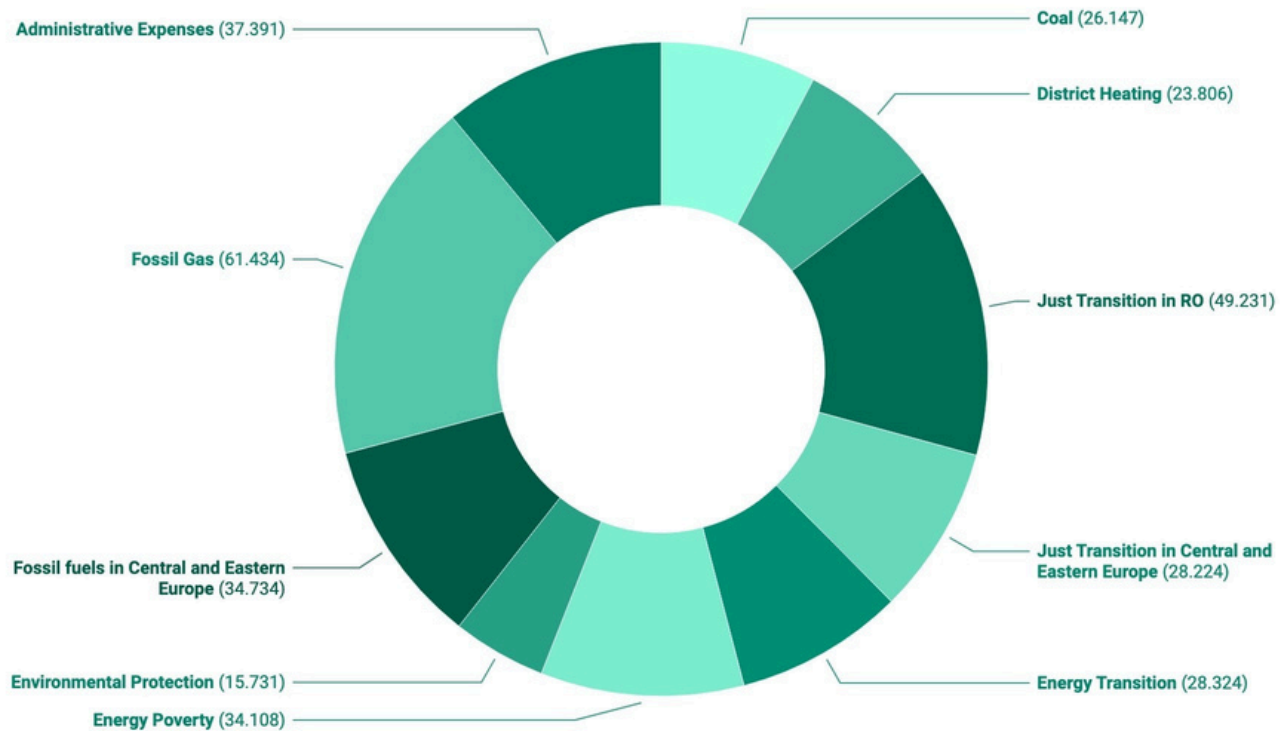


White Paper – The position of civil society participating in the event "The future of the European Green Pact: between ecological balance and social equity"

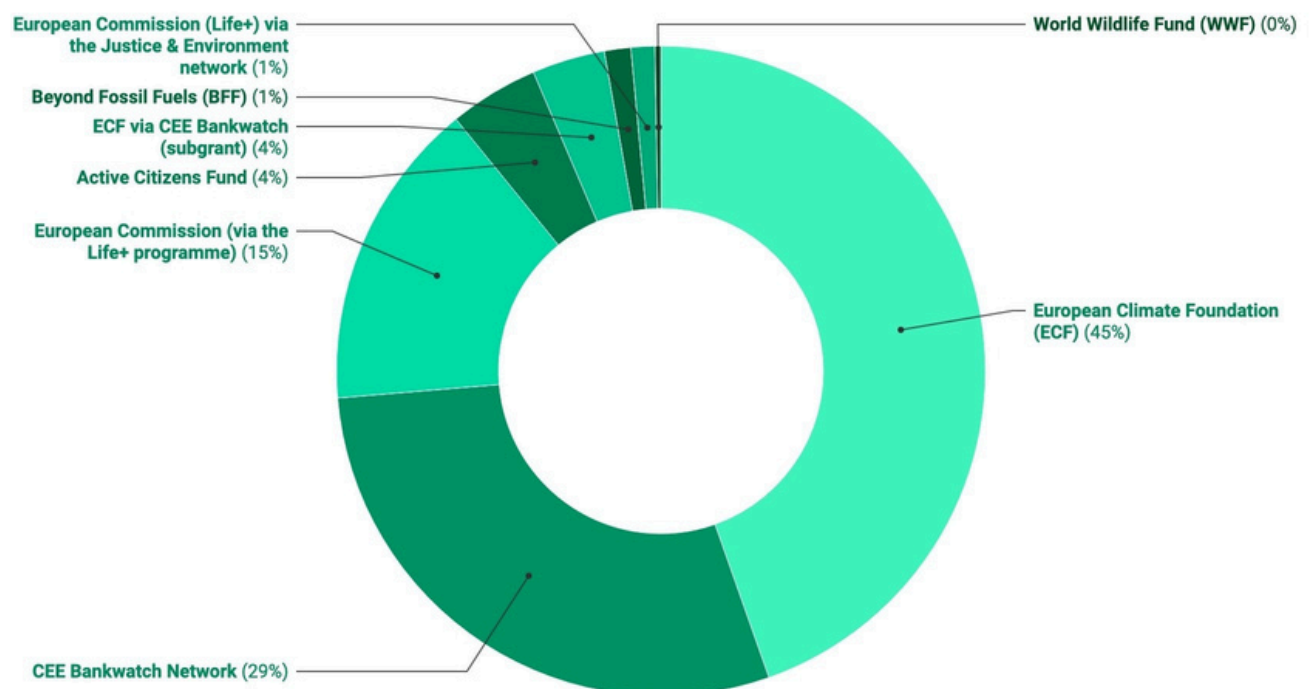
ANNUAL BUDGET

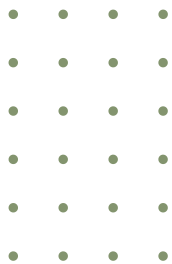


Budget per campaign in EURO



Funders 2024





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