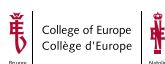




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INSPIRING A JUST TRANSITION

Recommendations for decision-making and taking action



Inspiring a just transition

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Based on lessons learnt through the coal regions exchange programme of the Initiative for coal regions in transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine.

Prepared by the Secretariat of the Initiative for coal regions in transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine.

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Learn more about the initiative:

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Cover photo: Delegates from Western Macedonia (Greece) visit exchange peers at a power plant just across the border in North Macedonia in July 2022. (Source: WBUA initiative secretariat, photographed by Dejan Stojanov).

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Key Messages

Key recommendations for decision-makers are listed here for quick reference, but also explained in more detail in later sections of this publication.

- 1. Define priorities!** within a just transition plan/strategy that sets clear phase-out dates and concrete, achievable and just pathways.
- 2. Synergise planning!** with a robust regulatory framework to enable funding and implementation for all levels and sectors.
- 3. Collaborate multi-laterally!** via meaningful multi-level governance and across sectors, in all stages of the just transition.
- 4. Empower local!** and regional actors with the mandate and capacities needed for local-oriented planning, projects and impact.
- 5. Break silos!** across all relevant sectors and levels to foster suitable roles and responsibilities throughout the just transition.
- 6. Inspire everyone!** via deeper engagement which meaningfully activates youth and other marginalised groups affected by the transition.
- 7. Unite voices!** of key actors to take advantage of regional synergies for a cohesive, mutually-beneficial transformation.
- 8. Communicate clearly!** and strategically to build up broad trust and acceptance and increase stakeholder ownership.
- 9. Develop strategically!** to attract businesses matching regional needs and enable them to thrive.
- 10. Foster skills!** across the whole community to ensure a future-oriented workforce driving the economy forward.
- 11. Revitalise infrastructure!** and sites with proper environmental rehabilitation and repurpose them to synergise with future-oriented activities.
- 12. Transfer ownership!** of rehabilitated sites/assets to public authorities and update enabling legislation for locally-led repurposing.
- 13. Commit to renewables!** and efficiency by enabling investments and projects of different scales all around coal regions.
- 14. Get energised!** to shape local decarbonisation and bring to life the energy transition for, and with, the community.

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List of abbreviations

EC – European Commission
 ETS – Emissions Trading System
 EU – European Union
 JTF – Just Transition Fund
 JTM – Just Transition Mechanism
 NECP – National Energy and Climate Plan
 NGO – Non-governmental organisation
 LEAP – Local Environmental Action Plan
 SE(C)AP – Sustainable Energy (and Climate) Action Plan
 TJTP – Territorial Just Transition Plan
 WBUA – Western Balkans and Ukraine
 WBUA initiative – Initiative for coal regions in transition
 in the Western Balkans and Ukraine

Introduction

This publication synthesises insights gained from the [coal regions exchange programme](#) of the [Initiative for coal regions in transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine](#). Its aim is to highlight key lessons learnt in the participating regions and to derive potential **recommendations** to support a just transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine (referred to as WBUA). The publication is intended for stakeholders within the WBUA, and the international community, involved in energy transition topics and contributing to the realisation of a just transition across the wider region, and particularly for decision-makers among them shaping relevant processes.

The Initiative for coal regions in transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine (WBUA initiative) has aimed to assist countries and regions to move away from coal towards a carbon-neutral economy, while ensuring that this transition is just. It fostered dialogue across regions and between stakeholders through knowledge-sharing, capacity building, and exchange between coal regions in the Western Balkans and Ukraine and in the EU. The initiative was led by the [European Commission](#) and six collaborating international partners: the [World Bank](#), the [Energy Community Secretariat](#), the [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development](#), the [European Investment Bank](#), Poland's [National Fund for Environment Protection and Water Management](#), and the [College of Europe in Natolin](#). Collaboratively, they implemented the initiative from December 2020 until December 2023.

The initiative's secretariat provided direct support for facilitating its realisation and fostering collaboration among the diverse array of institutions and stakeholders involved in the initiative. This publication draws lessons learnt from the

coal regions exchange programme, which was among the tasks implemented by the secretariat.

About the coal regions exchange programme

The coal region exchange programme was designed from the start to offer just transition stakeholders from different regions an opportunity to start direct, one-to-one dialogues, connect and learn from each other, and transfer knowledge. The possibility to explore peers' experiences and reflect about own challenges and developments has been helping to accelerate local clean energy transitions.

The programme's [call for applicants](#) was opened from June to September 2021. Coal regions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine and the EU were invited to participate in the exchange programme. A total of 32 applications representing a diverse geographic spread were submitted for participation in the programme, which then underwent a thorough selection process.

Based on the assessment of the submissions, selected regional delegations were engaged to join the programme. The delegations included representatives of diverse stakeholder groups: local, regional and national authorities, energy companies, NGOs, trade unions¹, academia, etc. Additional regions were also invited to become part of the programme in response to specific needs of Ukrainian participants. Ultimately, eight sets of [exchange partnerships](#) were formed, representing stakeholders from 22 coal regions in the WBUA and the EU.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

¹ The [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe](#) (FES SOE) has supported the participation of some of the trade union representatives in the exchange programme.

The implementation of the exchanges started in 2022 and continued in 2023, each featuring either single or reciprocal in-person visits. All the visits were successful, despite tight agendas, allowing participants to still make the most of each other's experience in working towards a just transition. They allowed for a joint reflection by all participants from the WBUA and the EU on the crucial importance of a holistic and strategic approach when preparing for a transition. The visits thus became a powerful source of motivation, as well as

providing inspirational practical knowledge needed to ensure that the transition is just.

Extensive interactions and discussions leading up to, during and following these visits enabled regional practitioners an opportunity to truly solidify their relationships with one another, pointing towards fruitful cooperation even beyond the programme. For further details of each exchange, please [see here](#).



Figure 1. Montenegrin delegates from Pljevlja visited Velenje (Slovenia) in September 2023, after first hosting them in March 2023.

(Source: WBUA initiative sekretariat, photographed by Vanesa Begić)

Recommendations for inspiring a just transition

This section outlines a set of fourteen recommendations derived from the coal regions exchange programme of the WBUA initiative. They address five themes:

- **Transition governance and strategy;**
- **Stakeholder engagement and communication;**
- **Economic diversification and regional development;**
- **Infrastructure and site sustainability; and**
- **Sustainable energy transition.**

Transition governance and strategy

1. Define priorities! within a just transition plan/strategy that sets clear phase-out dates and concrete, achievable and just pathways.

Strong national just transition strategies/plans, based on deep socio-economic analyses, should be the cornerstone of all coal phase-outs and should directly enable local/regional planning as well. Though a structured vision is crucial, plans should still move well beyond mere declarations, instead obligating an ambitious, legally-binding timeframe for closures aligned with concrete, feasible pathways which ensure that the transformation truly is just in all respects. Suitable monitoring mechanisms should be embedded in plans from the start to ensure implementation leads to impacts on the ground.

The lack of official national plans for the transition across much of the WBUA greatly limits planning and development efforts from national down to local levels, whether those initiatives led by public authorities or business diversification in the private sector. It would not necessarily need to be structured equivalently to how Territorial Just Transition

Plans (TJTP) fit into the EU's governance framework, but still is a gap needing resolution. Such strategic ambitions could be amended to already existing policy or embedded within an upcoming strategy relevant to the transformation. The important thing is, whichever document is determined to be most appropriate for a given coal region, that planning a just transformation must be based on a deep analysis of regions' own socio-economic situations (e.g., key drivers, gaps and obstacles) in order to make science-based decisions that point to realistic and binding targets.

In fact, not even the actual timeframe itself (e.g., three vs. ten years) of the phase-out is the most crucial element, but rather that there is clear commitment making it an obligation by a concrete deadline. Low political will and unclear signals from above tend to result in trickle-down effects for coal regions' public authorities and communities themselves, who are all left in a state of limbo and unsure what the future holds for them. Even though nearly everyone realises the inevitability of closures on the horizon, even if certain political rhetoric may claim otherwise, the ongoing uncertainty of its timeframe thwarts forward-facing action. On the ground, this can accelerate depopulation and exacerbate general economic and societal decline within affected communities.

Unfortunately, many energy utilities (especially around WBUA, but also even in some EU countries) seem rather intent to continue mining and utilising coal for as long as they are allowed to do so. Likewise, many energy/mining companies are perceived to be behaving in counterproductive ways which slow down any initiatives to precisely define phase-out or closure dates. In some cases, this indirectly reflects the agenda of certain national policymakers (e.g., if more progressive management of state-owned utilities are replaced due to political reasons), more than a reflection of the utilities' best interests, since resisting the transition can be rather counterproductive to companies' long-term prospects in many respects.

Even though current WBUA transitions (or lack thereof) tend to be very influenced by energy utilities, this sense of stagnation also hinders private sector development. Businesses at all levels, even including the energy and mining companies themselves, are delayed in transforming their own business models towards more future-oriented revenue streams, not least because it is difficult to attract investors to commit when it remains undecided how long current coal-dominated conditions will persist. Therefore, utilities would do well to also signal their own clear commitment so that they are seen, and can truly act, as willing partners in the solution.

As EU coal regions implement their respective TJTPs – largely stimulated by the EC’s Just Transition Fund ([JTF](#)) agenda – various lessons learnt can be drawn upon for the WBUA. First and foremost, TJTPs or equivalent just transition strategies/plans (at national, or even local/regional levels) should function as crucial documents building on deep socio-economic analyses and which clearly define regional

priorities (e.g., stable and diversified low-emission economy; high-quality and attractive environment; professionally and socially active residents) for the long term. As well-proven by the German Ruhrgebiet, structural planning should be done on a timescale spanning at least a few decades for visions to succeed.

So far, challenges are already revealing themselves for those coal regions where timeframes and objectives remain less defined, whereas many regions which have managed to set more concrete phase-outs are finding multi-level and cross-sector cooperation succeeding. Regions remain optimistic that projects in the pipeline will have positive impacts, but this is still to be confirmed after robust monitoring mechanisms are more firmly in place. In any case, strong just transition strategies/plans are already serving well as unifying guidance for all actors, and also prove useful to effectively communicate to everyone the forward-oriented future in store for these regions.



Figure 2. North Macedonia delegates from Bitola and Kičevo visited Western Macedonia (Greece) in October 2022, after first hosting them in July 2022.

(Source: WBUA initiative secretariat, photographed by Florinotika Nea)

2. Synergise planning! with a robust regulatory framework to enable funding and implementation for all levels and sectors.

Transition plans/strategies do not operate in a political vacuum, meaning that they should be planned in sync with other policies and programmes from the very start. In many cases, it may be that legislation might need to be updated to account for the just transition context, to avoid contradictions and to pave the way for modern solutions. However, national just transition strategies/plans (JTTPs or otherwise) and updated laws serve little purpose if enabling conditions (e.g., dedicated funding instruments) are not likewise established and strengthened to ensure diverse local to national actors truly have the means to implement actions.

Especially in WBUA countries, lacking or ineffectual legislation in related sectors can be rather disruptive if not modernised to explicitly prioritise just transition aspects. Such national-level gaps (e.g., if National Energy and Climate Plans, NECP, do not adequately address the transformation) may mean that more operative legislation or mechanisms are delayed. This can pose a particularly important obstacle for bottom-up initiatives from municipalities and others, which might otherwise contribute well to the transformation with their own planning and projects.

Sometimes beneficial policies are altogether missing (e.g., no legislation on renewables in Montenegro, missing bylaws about prosumers and energy communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or a lack of state incentives for special economic zones in Ukraine). In other cases, they are simply not being utilised to their full potential (e.g., countless LEAPs, SEAPs, SECAPs,² etc.) across the WBUA, especially for how they might already concretely address some just transition concerns. In a few examples, certain existing laws are even considered counterproductive to transition efforts and should be quickly updated (e.g., needs to enable the transfer of industrial sites/assets to local authorities in Poland or Ukraine).

On the other hand, there may also be already-functional policies and programmes at various levels which seem

rather complementary to transformation planning as well. For example, the Czech [RE:START](#) programme pre-dates current national transition plans, or local strategies in [Libiaz](#) and [Brzeszcze](#) provided inputs into Małopolska's regional planning. In some cases, new/upcoming processes (e.g., NECPs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia; or Ukraine's recently reinstated [Energy strategy for the period up to 2050](#) or an expected strategy to rebuild areas devastated by Russia's large-scale war of aggression) have potential for enhancing transition planning, but it still remains to be seen how well the relevant decision-makers actually manage to augment just transition synergies and avoid contradictions.

Another widespread problem across the WBUA is that key documents tend to be more declarative than true enablers of change. A critical missing component is that much stronger synergies are needed to develop and maintain robust funding mechanisms for just transition activities to ensure that any new plans are not thereafter only gathering dust on a bookshelf. While approved JTF territories in the EU can access dedicated financing instruments, there is not (yet) anything so similar for coal regions in the WBUA – absence of such a comparable instrument is a very common refrain heard from every single WBUA region, and the EC and other international institutions are urged to help find the means to introduce this missing ingredient.

Similarly, WBUA countries likewise lack special national funds dedicated to supporting such transformation activities, though they might learn from missteps in the EU (e.g., Slovenian funds distributed between eight different ministries are perceived to be overly difficult to apply for funds, especially for large, cross-cutting projects). However, the WBUA can also find positive inspiration from certain EU countries leveraging the “polluter pays principle” for the transition (e.g., the Greek fund sourced by CO₂ emission taxes or that Czech energy utilities must pay into a fund for the eventual rehabilitation of post-mining sites). In Ukraine, such a fund still remains an ambition, despite Russia's war of aggression, and it is meant to be related to intended national/regional JTTPs, but of course it currently remains uncertain how and when any of these will truly develop.

² Numerous WBUA municipalities already have Local Environmental Action Plans (LEAP), though actual implementation tends to be lagging. Likewise, many have Sustainable Energy (and Climate) Action Plans (SEAP or SECAP), including around the EU, that could benefit from stronger follow-through.

3. Collaborate multi-laterally! via meaningful multi-level governance and across sectors, in all stages of the just transition.

Given the clear need to align various policies and initiatives, multi-level governance should be an obvious approach. Inviting all relevant local to national public authorities to participate helps ensure a proper mix from higher-level overviews to on-the-ground experiences. Ideally further enhanced also by other sectors' expertise, such vertical and horizontal collaboration could not only break knowledge silos through more diverse insights, but will intensify the credibility of the entire process.

Unfortunately, many WBUA coal regional stakeholders, and even some in the EU, remain side-lined by a rather closed governance culture favouring centralised decision-making over more collaborative approaches (e.g., open working groups). The energy sector traditionally being a national-level jurisdiction only exacerbates the governance gap and often leads to energy utilities being included much more into WBUA transition planning processes than other actors.

Adequate involvement of local governments – who are most in tune with on-the-ground needs – still remains very limited in most WBUA countries (e.g., perhaps most so in Serbia, and also Kosovo to some degree). Pljevlja might represent a possible exception within the WBUA, likely due to it being Montenegro's only coal region, such that its municipality actually has some leverage to shape action. However, even in such a situation, multi-layered involvement of various stakeholders and solid cooperation between levels of government remains essential and still requires improvements, especially to counteract any instability from election changes. Meanwhile, many municipal decision-makers across much of the WBUA suffer from knowledge-silos whereby key information and data is not properly shared from higher levels with them. For example, one mayor mentioned that they sometimes receive better information during international meetings and from EU bodies than directly from their own national authorities.

In war-torn Ukraine, local-level involvement has decreased dramatically under military administration due to other (justifiable) priorities. Even so, these exchanges have proven that local/regional ambitions for a just transition remain very vibrant among stakeholders – quite a testament to their commitment, given the unfortunate circumstances – and they remain eager for decentralised governance to be returned as quickly as possible so that they can once

again contribute to nationwide processes related to the just energy transition.

As for next steps for any WBUA region, there is no cookie-cutter approach to how it should function, and several different governance modalities are in place among EU coal regions, any of which may or may not be suitable to WBUA countries' own contexts. The Polish transition, including TJTP development and negotiations with the EC, has been largely driven by regional authorities and augmented by enthusiastic municipalities, proactive civil society, competent scientific institutions and national actors who hold jurisdiction over several key topics. A similar approach occurred in the Ruhrgebiet decades ago when it began its own transformation (now perceived as a lighthouse among coal regions). Meanwhile, Czech and Greek national authorities lead their respective transitions rather strongly, but still manage to cooperate quite well with regional and local authorities, as well as other sectors (especially strong in Western Macedonia). Somewhat similarly, Slovenia's transition is also nationally-led, but at least its city of Velenje can, with other local actors, actively shape its own transformation. Finally, partially bottom-up governance is being attempted in Romania and Bulgaria. In Jiu Valley, a dedicated association functions as an umbrella organisation working with all levels (especially municipalities), while a local development agency in Stara Zagora is working hard to unite its own local authorities and other actors in spite of certain resistance to the transition exhibited by their national government.

It should be obvious that the just transition can be made even more impactful by ensuring it does not function in a vacuum, but rather is a collaborative effort (e.g., via topic-oriented working groups) complemented by information being sufficiently shared between all key actors. Given the relatively closed governance culture which persists around the WBUA, there is likely to be resistance from certain decision-makers to meaningfully bring on board additional colleagues from local to national authorities, especially if it misaligns with domestic political trends. To some degree, opening up such processes to non-public sectors may prove even more difficult, especially for civil society or less formal groups (e.g., youth) to be considered as equals. Even so, it should also be stressed that even the rather progressive multi-lateral approach praised in Poland today did not happen overnight and has evolved through trial and error over the course of their own decades-long transformations. Nonetheless, their experience would indicate that broadening the spectrum of decision-makers allowed into the WBUA's own transition planning is well worth the effort.

4. Empower local! and regional actors with the mandate and capacities needed for local-oriented planning, projects and impact.

It is not sufficient to only integrate subnational stakeholders into national processes, but rather these same actors need to be able to take action locally as well, especially municipalities. For local/regional planning and implementation, a proper mandate and/or the enhancement of key competencies may still be needed, and in most cases adequate funding is required to transform their ideas into accomplishments.

Even though local/regional public authorities might be considered as the ones most directly having to face main consequences of the transformation, they often lack the jurisdiction to act. Matters related to energy usually remain within the national domain, but it likewise can also prove difficult for locals to contribute to other sectors important to the transition (e.g.: land/asset ownership, transport, education, labour reform, etc.). Even when problems and solutions are recognised, policy updates are often slow to enable local/regional actors wanting to take charge, particularly within the WBUA.

At the same time, subnational governmental levels still generally struggle not only with information gaps, but also with low staff capacities, much less topic-oriented expertise in structural planning itself. If not explicitly supported in a targeted manner (e.g., by dedicated capacity-building programmes), it can become something of a “vicious circle” from which most WBUA coal regions (and even some EU ones) find it rather difficult to escape without bridging key skill-gaps (e.g., in grant/proposal writing, blending financing, project management, stakeholder mapping, communications, attracting investments, working capabilities in English, etc.).

Even so, it certainly is not impossible to change things for the better, though it might first require robust local-level political support/ambition. This is perhaps best evidenced by the coal town of Velenje, which has managed to build up a strong dedicated team widely-praised for its work on sustainable development and the just energy transition (including winning the EU Green Leaf Award for 2024 under the motto “from black to green & bright” and its annual *Welcome Future* conference).

Although the ideal would clearly be for public authorities to follow Velenje’s excellent example to develop in-house competencies on their own, realistically most in the WBUA will not be able to do so anytime soon, unless explicitly supported by a programme. Such authorities might instead consider it a reasonable workaround to delegate certain responsibilities to another existing regional actor – positive examples of strong organisations already active in Stara Zagora, the Ústí region and Western Macedonia show the potential viability of this approach – or even via the creation of a new dedicated body (e.g., as in Jiu Valley). These EU regions’ experiences show that such a modality can be most effective if they receive a proper mandate and adequate funding.

Despite the clear challenges, there are still many WBUA authorities and other actors in all the regions who remain eager to actively contribute to the transition, and several have already begun their own initiatives at the local and regional levels. (e.g., in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Ukraine). In these cases, a key component may be to have proactive, ambitious local decision-makers at a local level to have the political will and know-how to take charge. Especially under circumstances where suitable national top-down guidance and mechanisms are slow to be put in place, local change-makers can generate their own (limited) official mandate and capability to dedicate capacities towards the transition.



Figure 3. Bosnian delegates from Kakanj and Breza visited the Stara Zagora region (Bulgaria) in May 2023.

(Source: WBUA initiative secretariat, photographed by Ilko Gruev)

Stakeholder engagement and communication

5. Break silos! across all relevant sectors and levels to foster suitable roles and responsibilities throughout the just transition.

To most effectively work across horizontal and vertical silos, comprehensive stakeholder mapping is needed to identify all decision-makers and other actors, their needs, ambitions, etc. across all sectors. Attaining an elevated level of detail can prove crucial to better understand roles and responsibilities, being sure to involve relevant stakeholders in a suitable manner during each phase of transformation processes.

Most WBUA countries, and also some in the EU, generally lack a strong sense of shared-governance culture. The result tends to be an elite group of decision-makers shaping the transition, and with few earnest attempts to engage or even simply consult others, much less systematically map out stakeholders (e.g., their needs, degrees of interest/influence, ambitions, etc.) to enable proper participation. There are some partial exceptions, e.g.: Pljevlja leveraging the fact that it is the only coal region in Montenegro, strong Ukrainian NGOs united with local authorities pushing their views onto the national agenda, scientific experts in Bosnia and Herzegovina in advisory roles, and researchers in North Macedonia developing robust transition scenarios. However,

by and large in the WBUA, knowledge- and jurisdictional-silos persist and decision-making about regions' transformations instead continue to be dominated by national authorities and energy utilities.

Decision-makers need support to understand the importance of broader engagement and to build their own capacities to actually put it into practice. Much could be learnt from the successes and mistakes already experienced in EU coal regions. Poland, as well as Germany, provides an exemplary model of a region-led approach that has learnt, through decades of trial and error, to collaborate with national and local authorities, to foster scientific institutions and a stronger business community, and to listen to civil society and trade unions. Though Czech, Greek and Slovenian authorities lead from a national level, they also cooperate reasonably well with their regional and local counterparts, as well as most other sectors (note: an Ústí development council, various scientific institutions and chambers of commerce in Western Macedonia, and the city of Velenje itself and the regional energy agency located there). Meanwhile, more bottom-up approaches in Romania and Bulgaria are seeing some success in broader engagement: Jiu Valley has a dedicated association (even with some official mandate) cooperating well across sectors and levels, while Stara Zagora's development agency is attempting to fill an engagement gap despite the Bulgarian government's relative resistance to the transition.



Figure 4. Ukrainian delegates from Novovolynsk, Chervonohrad, Lytovezh and Poromiv visited Małopolska and Silesia regions (Poland) in July 2023.

(Source: WBUA initiative secretariat, photographed by Paweł Czartoryjski)

Therefore, key WBUA actors would do well to identify and cooperate with more diverse partners across levels and sectors, mapping them out via a “quadruple helix” approach (i.e., public authorities, private sector, academia and civil society) to find suitable roles and responsibilities for all key actors. Where regional practitioners' capacities to put such methods into practice are insufficient, suitable efforts should be made to support them to build up such useful skills. Across the WBUA, numerous NGOs and others have managed to develop a strong track record for contributing to cross-cutting issues related to the just transition. Scientific partners should absolutely be brought on board, but also conditions should be built up so that entire institutes specialised in the transition can develop and thrive. Trade unions should definitely be engaged more consistently, though with a caveat that some remain overly aligned with the messages from their own utilities' interests, and therefore it should be ensured that more independent trade unions relevant to the sector also have their own voices heard.

6. Inspire everyone! via deeper engagement which meaningfully activates youth and other marginalised groups affected by the transition.

Although multi-level and cross-sectoral engagement is certainly crucial, to truly give voice to all those affected, deeper engagement is generally necessary. This means involvement should extend beyond formal organisations to include atypical groups as well. In practice, stakeholder mapping (as mentioned in recommendation #5) and strategic communication may prove invaluable to understand and reach these groups, much less ensure they contribute to ongoing processes at all stages.

Given that WBUA countries (and certain ones in the EU) function in such a centralised manner with somewhat limited governance shared among actors, it should come as no surprise that the inclusion of informal stakeholder groups into decision-making lags behind as well. Since these groups are not typically invited to contribute to just transition planning, then it is unfortunately natural that their concerns likewise tend to remain largely neglected during implementation phases. There are projects here and there across the WBUA which do manage to address certain groups (e.g., female entrepreneurs in Banovići or youth start-ups in nearby Živinice), but there is a lack of consistency and scale within WBUA countries to more systematically address how youth, women, Roma, the poor and numerous other groups will be particularly affected by the transition.

Unfortunately, it cannot be claimed that EU coal regions have always successfully engaged their own marginalised groups perfectly either. Most still suffer from a certain degree of “brain-drain” and youth not returning to the region, but many are still trying to rectify matters when able. Some have realised that though industry workers justifiably are targeted as the main ones affected by the coal phase-out, transitions should not only be miner-centric, since other community members may have slightly different priorities worth integrating as well. Libiąż has put effort into integrating the different dynamics/challenges

related to miners’ families and women (including the reliance local businesses have on them as employees and customers). Meanwhile, several inspirational examples of youth engagement can be found among EU coal regions (e.g., a conference aimed at discussing prospects for youth in Stara Zagora, the recent founding of a transition-oriented youth council in Western Macedonia, young climate activists all around Poland and Germany, or continual work to engage youth in Jiu Valley despite their mistrust of many official processes).

WBUA coal regions should consider just transition processes as an opportunity to meaningfully activate all manner of marginalised groups (e.g., women, youth, elderly, differently-abled, ethnic minorities, immigrants, poor, etc.). Of course, formal organisations may be able to represent them in discussions, but it can be much more impactful to not just talk *about* these groups, but to actually speak *with* them, or at least use certain formats (e.g., surveys) to enhance understanding of their needs and dreams. It should be realised that strategic communication may rise in importance even more for such groups, since they inherently tend to lack centralised contact points.

Though of course meaningful engagement of all marginalised groups should be a priority, issues related to local youth tend to stand out for every single WBUA and EU coal region. Though young people tend to have less interest in the abstract procedural aspects of decision-making, they often prove keen to influence those decisions (e.g., in the allocation of funds) which more concretely shape their future. This might also relate to a lack of trust in the system held by many and/or that they already have their sights set on leaving as soon as possible anyway. Nonetheless, to reverse such “brain drain” trends, the urgency should be clear – young people need to be activated and given a realistic perspective to stay in coal regions. This means not only developing more favourable conditions *for* them (e.g., education, jobs, culture/leisure, etc.), but actually doing it *with* them in a way that engages their interest – this kind of an approach could inspire them to become the very change-makers that their regions truly require.

7. Unite voices! of key actors to take advantage of regional synergies for a cohesive, mutually-beneficial transformation.

Key local/regional stakeholders should be encouraged and enabled to cooperate with each other, rather than compete, to ensure cohesive development across the region. In many cases, municipalities or regional authorities may be a natural fit to function as a core leader of diverse coalitions. In other regions, it may be more appropriate to coalesce around some other local/regional actor. Regardless of who leads the way, it is crucial that stakeholders see it as a credible voice for the region, ideally with an official mandate to act and adequate funding to implement actions.

Likely due to the rather centralised nature of national governance found across most of the WBUA, there often can be only a limited amount of synergy among many public actors, especially in cases where political (party) differences fragment unity – though of course this problem is found in the EU as well. The larger issue is, with many WBUA municipalities struggling (and already rather dependent on tax income from the coal sector which will inevitably phase out), subnational actors often end up competing for (limited) funding that is available. That such communities all have relatively similar circumstances does not really help them to discover unique ways forward to distinguish themselves from neighbouring areas when seeking out investors. Nonetheless, some are already finding the opposite can be true as well – that their similarities can actually be an asset because it provides an opportunity to solve common problems by working together (even overcoming political differences).

These kinds of lessons have already been learnt among many EU coal regions, and many stress cohesion over competition whenever possible. In Stara Zagora, municipalities have coalesced around an already existing development agency working to attempt to combine their municipal mandates to advance their common interests during the still-ongoing national TJTP process, with an intention to continue this unified front at later stages to jointly decide on investment allocations (via the JTF and otherwise) only when coherent with their regional vision. Their neighbours to the north in Jiu Valley have mandated a dedicated association to lead a coalition linking municipalities and the county government with local NGOs and businesses for joint collaboration

towards a common strategic goal. Even in regions where national or regional authorities already strongly lead the way, unified cooperation with others still remains a key priority, whether done via a regional council acting as a key liaison in Ústí (e.g., for a hydrogen valley), a network of Western Macedonian chambers of commerce jointly (rather than competitively) developing large projects, or formal bodies of mining communities in the Ruhrgebiet or Silesia each becoming embedded into transition decision-making and pushing for collective development.

Despite the challenges mentioned previously, there have already been positive developments in the WBUA mirroring EU regions' experiences for establishing bottom-up credibility by taking advantage of municipal mandates. For example, dialogues have been initiated between North Macedonia's three towns most affected by the upcoming transition, Bitola, Kičevo and Novaci. Meanwhile, efforts have already begun to formalise cooperation among all of Bosnia and Herzegovina's main coal municipalities – certainly no small feat, since the initiative crosses borders between the country's two entities, which have a history of poor cooperation due to lingering ethnic/political tensions decades after the war there. At the same time, even more practical synergies are already being fostered in the country, such as among municipalities sharing Lake Modrac, where a former lignite mine has recently been repurposed as a modern intermunicipal landfill (including plans for on-site renewables and circular economy activities) or their mayors' declarations to work towards a joint just transition strategy.

However, perhaps the most inspirational example might be the formalised platform of coal towns in Ukraine's Donetsk region which has, strongly in concert with civil society, already been rather prominent and active even before Russia's full-scale invasion. That, in itself, deserves praise for their continued commitment to the just energy transition despite the war. Furthermore, even more inspiring now is that they are actually pushing their agenda onto an even wider scale by recently expanding to include [four additional Ukrainian coal regions as well](#), and this broader network intends to coordinate joint strategies and projects, rather than competing with each other. Given current circumstances, their unified voice speaks volumes about their dedication, and the hope is that those in power will earnestly pay attention to their words and support joint actions (as well as all across the WBUA) through even stronger mandates, enhanced capacities and funding.

8. Communicate clearly! and strategically to build up broad trust and acceptance and increase stakeholder ownership.

Credible and effective communications should be prioritised to a higher degree than typically is the case, being able to improve impressions internally and externally. Transparent, and persistent, dissemination fosters political and social acceptance for upcoming changes in line with a region's forward-thinking vision. At the same time, strategic communication can trigger and maintain stakeholders' buy-in for the transformation and help attract businesses and residents to contribute to the communal vision.

In many cases, there is poor understanding among the populace, as well as some decision-makers, about what the just transition is, why it is happening and what it actually will mean for the community, in terms of both challenges and opportunities. Many of those who are aware of it still tend to focus more on the coal phase-out's immediate consequences than its forward-thinking intentions for sustainable energy and diverse justice. Uncertainty about it all is also often exploited in WBUA politics, particularly within populist rhetoric, as though it serves little purpose other than to appease demands from Brussels. Such fear-mongering results in a misinformed public which, as the late mayor of Živinice once put it, worries that the mines will close tomorrow. Without any clearly and strategically communicated vision, most WBUA coal regions are therefore struggling to show their own residents that their transition will in fact be a more gradual, logically-determined process precisely to ensure it remains just.

On the other hand, many coal regions in the EU have already embraced the need for strong communications which breeds trust in the just transition. Their goal is not to merely “spin” things in a positive light, but also to honestly transmit the costs expected (not only in terms of finances), challenges being faced and that (as one participant expressed) even a well-planned just transition also will not solve everything by tomorrow. Many regions (e.g., Stara Zagora, Ústí, Western Macedonia and Jiu Valley) have found that organisations outside of government hierarchies can serve as rather credible communications hubs. In Serbia, NGOs and trade unions have together established contact with coal-dependent local authorities to promote their just transition, and to discuss gaps and opportunities with these oft-neglected stakeholders. Polish regions have learnt (including from missteps during the initial years of mine closures in the

1990s) that coherent communications also should remain a “two-way street”, not only transmitting information and updates to the populace, but also ensuring that those in charge pay attention to others’ voices – all of which is now being structured into an official communications strategy about Silesia’s transition.³ Meanwhile, Velenje’s efforts are especially worth investigating to see how a local/regional vision can help shift how the city and region is perceived internally and externally (as well-depicted from its EU Green Leaf Award 2024 motto “from black to green & bright” and the title of its annual “Welcome Future” conference).

Given the uncertainty, worry, and misinformation about the just energy transition, it seems clear that there is a large communications gap that must be bridged. The general populace (and media) needs to better understand the true reasons for why it is necessary to phase out coal, and that “tomorrow” will lead neither to sudden closures and layoffs nor immediate success and blue skies – though framing the transition in terms of improved air quality could probably gain traction and increase public acceptance in most coal regions across the WBUA.

Meanwhile, key stakeholders need to break information-silos to both give and receive all relevant information about the transition process. Both knowing and showing how they can and should contribute to proper planning and project implementation helps to prepare for, and possibly even mitigate, many of the socio-economic impacts feared by the general public. Setting up a structured communications strategy may likely prove valuable for different stakeholder types to be targeted with tailored messages and via suitable channels (realising that e.g., social media is useful for youth, while over-reliance on digital formats may exclude the elderly) – a particular practical example which may prove rather appropriate to most WBUA regions can be found in Živinice’s dedicated office for citizens and investors in diaspora, or even less formal approaches towards this audience (e.g., in Jiu Valley), with a distinct message that such emigrants should return to and/or invest in their hometown community. It also may be beneficial to consider a higher frequency of communications to persistently raise awareness and increase chances that the messages are being received. Whichever approaches might be deemed most suitable for a given region, the overall point remains the same, to ensure that the just transition can be coherently framed as it ought to be, namely as a unique opportunity for current generations to shape a forward-thinking vision for the region of the future, and then actually bring it to life.

³ Silesia’s upcoming Communication Strategy, developed as part of the START technical assistance facility for EU coal regions, will be published in early 2024 amongst other useful [Knowledge products](#).

Economic diversification and regional development

9. Develop strategically! across all relevant sectors and levels to foster suitable roles and responsibilities throughout the just transition.

With the coal phase-out it should be obvious that coal regions must urgently shift away from mono-economies and develop more diverse businesses. While certainly developing a more robust and innovative business culture can be useful, these coal regions should also exploit advantages they do already possess to guide development in a more strategic manner, even if beyond only economic concerns, as they seek to attract companies and residents to invest themselves into the region.

It is hardly unique to WBUA coal regions that they tend to have long functioned as mono-economies. Therefore, it is no wonder that with the shift away from their prior economic engine, these regions fear a wider collapse. Many municipal budgets remain extremely dependent on tax revenues directly related to mining/energy activities (e.g., 30-50% in many Ukrainian municipalities), as well as on those businesses providing services to this sector and their employees' families. With the coal phase-out, this stream of income will certainly diminish (especially in cases where mines are already not so profitable), thereby exacerbating budget shortfalls already experienced by some towns, and at the same time increasing their reliance on state subsidies and reducing capabilities to implement ambitious transformation projects.

The only viable solution for these coal towns to survive is to somehow diversify their economies. It is admittedly an uphill struggle, but luckily experiences in EU coal regions already show that it is possible to successfully enhance a coal region's economic profile. Plentiful examples of strategic economic

development exist across Poland (e.g., attracting investments in Bytom, a special economic zone and attracting modern industries in Katowice, foreseen renewables at a former mine heap in Libiąż, or numerous tech-hubs scattered all around Silesia). Velenje has established a local start-up incubator, while in Stara Zagora, a concerted effort is being made to push both digitalisation and the hydrogen economy, with the latter being a distinct focus also in the Ústí region (and many other EU coal regions as well). The role of Western Macedonian chambers of commerce in jointly applying for projects, attracting investors and supporting SMEs illustrates an approach which may be replicable in WBUA regions as well. Meanwhile, Jiu Valley is exploiting its own natural heritage for eco-tourism, an approach echoed in many other coal regions as well. Somewhat similarly, the Ruhrgebiet has already become famous for exploiting its own industrial heritage at its [Zollverein](#) museum, redeveloped [NZW](#) mine or the [Mark 51°7](#) innovation district.

These last examples also point to a message which WBUA regions may do well to bear in mind as they start to implement their own projects (e.g., start-up incubators and technology parks in Bosnia and Herzegovina or incentivising special economic zones in Ukraine): re-shaping a region's economy does not mean that its history should be ignored. In fact, by embracing it alongside the newer, future-oriented identity, coal regions can foster a broader sense of regional development beyond just purely-economic matters. This kind of an approach can help ensure that these regions are seen as dynamic, attractive places to invest and to live (especially important for counter-acting "brain-drain" of youth and skilled workers), but also while still celebrating the industrious nature of previous generations which has enabled future prosperity.



Figure 5. Bosnian delegates from Lukavac, Banovići and Živinice visited the Ústí region (Czech Republic) in June 2022, later hosting them in November 2022.. (Source: WBUA initiative secretariat, photographed by Ibra Ibrahimović)

10. Foster skills! across the whole community to ensure a future-oriented workforce driving the economy forward.

It is clear that miners and other workers within carbon-intensive industries will suffer most from the coal phase-out, and so will require vocational training to shift them into new jobs. Where possible, skill-mapping should be done to ensure they can be properly reskilled/upskilled. At the same time, educational reforms should be prioritised to make sure that the whole community rises up together and upcoming generations have the skillsets needed to forge a new economic and cultural identity for the region.

Though in the EU the idea of reskilling/upskilling miners is rather prominent, in many regards it is less so the case across much of the WBUA, except perhaps Ukraine. Their national transitions have so far tended to focus much more onto the decarbonisation of energy infrastructure/assets, and meaning that insufficient attention seems to be given to workers in these industries, much less wider consideration for educational reforms for the wider communities. At the same time, the age demographics of miners and power plant workers skews rather drastically away from younger generations in all WBUA countries (as well as many EU coal regions). From a skills-development perspective, this means that there may be little inherent interest to reskill existing workers within the industry. On the one side, the utilities still need them to continue their current jobs so that operations can continue (e.g., in North Macedonia or Velenje), and on the other side it might seem less worthwhile for workers to educate themselves for new endeavours as they reach retirement age anyway.

It also may be worth mentioning a nuanced difference between EU and WBUA miners: in most of the EU, working in a mine has tended to be perceived more consistently as relatively lucrative and reliable (at least compared to other jobs in those communities), and this in itself has led to unwillingness among many workers to invest their own efforts into re-training themselves if the new jobs earn less.

In contrast, across much of the WBUA, working as a miner does not necessarily equate neither to better wages nor being reliably-paid – the overall result tends more towards outward emigration of these miners (including to EU coal regions) and otherwise general social unrest and unemployment domestically. From a vocational perspective, this could theoretically translate into eagerness for reskilling – perhaps even valuably upskilling miners who learn about proper mine closures/rehabilitation in the EU, and subsequently return to transfer such knowledge back to the WBUA – but in reality, broad political and practical support for such initiatives has yet to truly materialise.

The more prominent issue related to skills seen by most coal regions, whether in the WBUA or EU, tends to be a general mismatch between coal-based competencies currently within the region, and those future-oriented skills needed for the kinds of businesses that decision-makers most desire to flourish. In terms of mining/energy workers, certain replicable efforts are already being made to shift them into “green jobs” (e.g., vocational programmes for miners and others to become certified solar or wind energy technicians in Bulgaria and Romania, or even training drone operators to work in agriculture in western Ukraine). Unfortunately, such programmes are not (yet) so common across the WBUA, nor has proper skill-mapping always been done thoroughly.

Fortunately, many coal regions across the WBUA and EU do at least benefit from having universities which are traditionally rather strong in supplying mining, energy and engineering experts to the local industries. On the plus side, it means that there is a sense of education-minded culture already embedded within these communities. However, there also often remains resistance to institute the kinds of educational reforms which are likely needed to shift these institutions away from carbon-intensive jobs towards more future-proof skills and fields. Nonetheless, some replicable reforms are happening (e.g., at the University of Western Macedonia), and there is optimism that it will improve perspectives of youth and others to stay and work in the region.

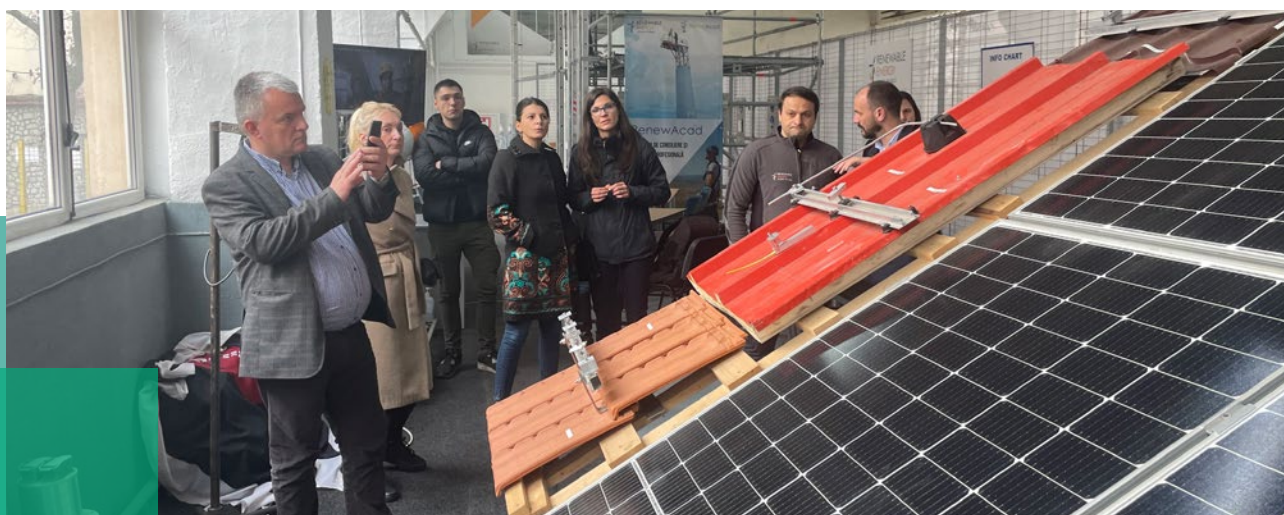


Figure 6. Serbian delegates visited the RenewAcad training centre in Jiu Valley (Romania) in April 2023. (Source: WBUA initiative secretariat, photographed by Jannis Beutel)

Infrastructure and site sustainability

11. Revitalise infrastructure! and sites with proper environmental rehabilitation and repurpose them to synergise with future-oriented activities.

The phase-out will require substantial efforts to deal with the large amount of infrastructure, sites and other assets remaining after carbon-intensive activities end. Where not already well-regulated, policy frameworks are needed to govern this process, including enforcement of the polluter-pays principle as needed to ensure proper restoration of brownfields (as well as open access to reporting on work done). Considering the large quantity of assets in question, substantial planning must also be done to determine how they should best be repurposed to align with the vision of the region.

A major concern in certain WBUA coal regions (e.g., Ukraine), but also within some EU ones, has been the quality of environmental restoration of coal sites and infrastructure. Even though most sites are not simply being neglected after activities cease, nonetheless there is frequent mistrust of how well rehabilitation processes are conducted. This concern seems especially prevalent when the mining utility itself has been in charge, but also even in some cases where a state company dedicated to this purpose managed such responsibilities. To be fair, it is also uncertain in most cases whether these suspicions are justified. Even so, it would still imply that at least there may remain certain gaps in the process (i.e., monitoring and enforcement of the work, or access to plans and reporting on such work) which may need to be rectified.

Within the EU, there are varying types of institutions involved in such processes. For example, Czech mining companies

oversee many aspects of post-mining activities and there is also a state company dedicated to rehabilitating sites (whose activities are supported by a fund to which all energy utilities must contribute, and which is explicitly dedicated to revitalising these sites). There have been definite operational lessons to learn from the Ústí experience which has focused primarily on the creation of a series of lakes, but also that it would have been better to have first developed a more coherent regional strategy about repurposing so many into lakes at all. On the other hand, learning from these missteps has also led to improved plans, such as the upcoming “[Green mine](#)” project to repurpose one still-active Ústí mine into a new lakefront neighbourhood, associated innovation centre and a floating photovoltaic array powering green-hydrogen production.

There is also plenty for WBUA regions to learn from deep experiences in Poland, in particular the strong involvement of dedicated research institutions for rehabilitating areas (e.g., recently with the online assessment/mapping tool [OPI TPP 2.0](#) or from the [RECOVERY](#) project on a mining heap in Libiąż). Such modern approaches have already proven helpful to attract investors and repurpose sites (e.g., installing renewables, special industrial zones, nature parks, technology hubs and heritage museums) in line with their regional plans. Meanwhile, eastern Ukrainian coal regions have found that they could benefit greatly from German experiences in the Ruhrgebiet in dealing with flooded mines (which the Donetsk region now faces due to the full-scale war) and eventually replicating state-of-the-art rehabilitation and repurposing solutions (e.g., ground water level control in Ibbenbüren and mine-water used as a district heating source in Bochum). Regardless of where the lessons are learnt, the point is that those managing WBUA mines will definitely need to start planning for the phase-out of their operations, and this means that all efforts should be made to ensure that staff capacities and skills are suitably developed in proper site closure, environmental rehabilitation, infrastructure management and repurposing such assets for future-oriented purposes.



Figure 7. Kosovo delegates visited Silesia (Poland) in July 2022.
(Source: WBUA initiative secretariat, photographed by Paweł Czartoryjski)

12. Transfer ownership! of rehabilitated sites/ assets to public authorities and update enabling legislation for locally-led repurposing.

Though energy utilities and (national) repurposing-companies have the expertise needed to rehabilitate sites, there is a growing demand for bottom-up solutions to be implemented which contribute towards strategic visions in the regions. A transfer of ownership of these sites and assets is generally seen as beneficial, but nonetheless current spatial-planning jurisdiction and/ or other legislation often prevents action from public authorities. Therefore, existing regulations require updates to remove administrative roadblocks which delay locally-led repurposing aligned with regional transition plans.

Due to the fact that mining and energy infrastructure traditionally falls under national-level jurisdictions (in both the WBUA and EU), it is relatively uncommon that subnational authorities have much of a mandate to decide exactly how these sites and assets are handled after the phase-out. Where relationships are cordial between local representatives of the energy utility and local authorities – thankfully this is often the case in practice – it may be easier to come to an understanding. Even in such cases, legislation may still delay, or even prohibit, transfers of ownership, thereby postponing them to be repurposed in a manner aligned with local/regional transition plans.

This state of affairs is not unique to the WBUA and can even be found in EU regions. For example, local Polish authorities have expressed frustration with how slow processes can

be to transfer assets to their control once they have been recultivated, which is not always assured to have been done properly (e.g., landslides on “rehabilitated” sites in Gierałtowiec). Similarly, Jiu Valley activists struggled for several years to transfer ownership of the Petrila mine from the state energy utility to the municipality to preserve it as a cultural heritage site. Meanwhile, Bulgarian state-owned enterprises and the national government also exert significant (undue) influence onto local-level spatial planning decisions, which of course can hinder the speed of project development, or even outright divert bottom-up planning if it does not suit higher-level interests.

Similarly, during earlier restructuring in Ukraine, many mining/ energy assets were sold off to others, instead of to their communities – though municipalities do intend to initiate dialogues with the national government once Russia’s war against Ukraine is over to change legislation which otherwise makes it difficult for them to attract investors to commit to their own bottom-up ambitions. Meanwhile, there are some local actors in the WBUA which already have taken the lead for repurposing certain sites where they are able to act (e.g., Živinice and Banovići cooperating to convert a former pit mine into a modern landfill shared by both municipalities, and which would not only contribute to recycling and circular economy, but is intended to deploy renewables on site). Such examples (as well as similar ones in other coal regions) demonstrate that proactive local decision-makers have ambitions for how certain sites can contribute to broader transition plans. However, unless more are somehow enabled to influence how they become repurposed, then they can do little but stare at a nearby piece of land and dream.



Figure 8. Czech delegates visited a repurposed lignite mine shared by Banovići and Živinice (Bosnia and Herzegovina) in November 2022.

(Source: WBUA initiative secretariat, photographed by George Stiff)

Sustainable energy transition

13. Commit to renewables! and efficiency by enabling investments and projects of different scales all around coal regions.

For coal regions to maintain their energy-centric identity – an ambition expressed by most coal regions – the most viable path forward without coal or other fossil fuels is by accelerating renewables and energy efficiency. Stronger action is needed from policymakers to create frameworks and incentives to switch to cleaner sources. Decision-makers should likewise stimulate utilities and other companies to invest in a sustainable energy mix (including for heating needs).

The fact that not all higher-level decision-makers in the WBUA act as though they are sincerely committed to the transition greatly impedes the uptake of renewables and energy efficiency. It makes attracting investments for new energy installation and distribution infrastructure even more of a challenge for most coal regions. Within the WBUA, policy gaps remain all too common (e.g., delayed NECPs or a lack of laws sufficiently incentivising renewables, [prosumers](#) or [energy communities](#)⁴), and instead send the wrong signals to domestic and external actors alike. Energy utilities continue to act without urgency to pivot themselves towards more innovative or future-proof niches, and outside investors are left to think that WBUA regions are not yet ready for renewables or efficiency measures. Without such financial inputs, those change-makers who are more committed to a just decarbonisation end up struggling to exploit those renewable resources which do exist and could otherwise meet local electricity and heat demands, much less help retain their region's identity as energy producers powering the country.

Furthermore, across most of the WBUA (and even within the EU), domestic politics can interfere with longer-term progress for the just energy transition. Political change at national levels all too often leads to new management of state-owned energy/mining companies, which could

subsequently influence previously intended reforms of their business activities. Likewise, new policymakers at any level can divert or block ongoing progress as continuing/incoming staff come to terms with how well previous ambitions align with the latest agendas. Therefore, it should be clear that such (somewhat unpredictable) shifts in the political winds represent all the more reason to aim to enshrine progressive transition policies within legal frameworks, from national down to municipal levels, which can then remain stable in the long-term.

Certain decision-makers also claim that renewable resources might not be available in sufficient quantities for a viable transition to continue their region's role powering the country. Some are therefore looking especially to still-unproven small modular nuclear reactors and have ambitions to become a key hydrogen valley (e.g., the Ústí region). Meanwhile places like Kosovo are currently so reliant on coal (e.g., 90% of its electricity mix, including imports), that a massive shift is urgently needed to push decision-makers onto a more sustainable pathway. Clearly in cases such as these, robust feasibility studies should be prioritised so that these regions are able to exploit whatever renewables are available to cover local needs (though, of course, only without unjust environmental or social consequences) before over-investing in less sustainable sources. Otherwise, they may also do well to simply consider if it might be worth shifting away from their traditional energy-centric identities and economies.

Many energy/mining utilities across the WBUA (and of course the EU as well) have, at least somewhat, begun to grasp the inevitability of the coal phase-out and already are taking a more active role in repurposing their own sites and investing in small- and large-scale renewable energy installations. At the least, many of them have realised that the days of profit from coal-based energy are in sharp decline, especially for those long dependent on state subsidies. The application of the European Emissions Trading System (ETS) is already affecting utilities' bottom line in the EU (not to mention the EC's upcoming large combustion plant directive), and an ETS system compatible with the rest of Europe's would soon have similar effects in WBUA countries' relations to the linked market.

⁴ Though many materials already exist for energy communities, the [JTP Knowledge Repository](#) features many publications tailored for JTF territories, and it may be worth highlighting a recent [energy communities toolkit](#) that draws greatly upon coal regions' experiences with this approach to citizen-oriented energy.

If energy utilities cannot read the writing on the wall, then it is up to decision-makers to spell it out for them with an enhanced policy framework, including the phase-out of corporate coal subsidies. Energy utilities should be urgently convinced to shift to other business models and develop clean energy options in a structured manner, and at appropriate capacities to make use of existing infrastructure, assets, expertise and workers as efficiently as possible. Energy utilities, especially state-owned ones, need to transform themselves into modern companies appropriate for the 21st century, meaning shifting away from a focus on maximum electricity production, and

instead towards dynamic renewable energy services (e.g., heating, aggregation, smart grid management, storage and balancing services for other producers, etc.). At the same time, other private sector players are already finding their own roles to play (e.g., Jiu Valley's [RenewAcad](#), an initiative led by various renewable energy companies to reskill Romanian miners, and others in the community to create a workforce for PV and wind installations). Policymakers should encourage such replicable initiatives which can contribute to the wider uptake of renewables in coal regions, while also creating future-proof jobs.



Figure 9. Ukrainian delegates from the Donetsk region visited Saerbeck and the Ruhrgebiet (Germany) in September 2023.

(Source: WBUA initiative secretariat, photographed by Linnéa Cullman)

14. Get energised! to shape local decarbonisation and bring to life the energy transition for, and with, the community.

Despite mixed signals from higher levels, local and regional actors should take the lead for accelerating renewables. Public authorities should exploit those entry points where they can directly make decisions (e.g., heating), as well as where they can exert influence meaningfully. Municipalities should lead by example by installing renewables at public facilities and making their own energy use as efficient as possible (including addressing energy poverty) and supporting locals to be able to do so themselves via energy savings and self-consumption.

Even without a mandate for many aspects of the energy transition at a local level, certain municipal efforts can still have many positive effects, all while still sustaining the community's identity and pride as an energy producer in the country. For example, heating (and cooling) tends to remain a field of energy with a clear local dimension, and therefore ideal for municipal actors to push towards efficiency and renewable sources. Many places have already developed strong sustainable [district heating](#) as integral parts of holistic systems (e.g., Saerbeck), while others are already decarbonising coal-based systems (e.g., Kozani or Velenje) and some are working on plans towards coal-free heating networks (e.g., Živinice or Kakanj).

Similarly, many municipalities (e.g., in Stara Zagora) are already contributing efforts towards improving energy efficiency and renewable energy installations of their own assets (e.g., street lighting), buildings and facilities. In parallel, others are likewise striving to support their own residents to follow their sustainable example via energy-advice centres and related community programmes (e.g., Velenje). Such a two-pronged approach helps to create market demand for sustainable energy services, thereby leading also to other cross-cutting benefits for the region, like diversification of the local economy and job creation, and could even contribute towards alleviating energy poverty (in social housing). It also maintains the regional identity as an energy hub, and actively upgrades it to one of green energy instead.

Saerbeck's model as an energetically self-sufficient community can be seen as rather exemplary as they demonstrate that it is not only large cities that can proactively implement state-of-the-art solutions in renewables and

efficiency. Pawłowice is following a similar path as well, aiming for its own energy independence and energy efficiency, as well as supporting citizen-owned energy. This latter point of energy communities is definitely worth highlighting as a valuable tool which should be accelerated all across the WBUA, because EU coal regions (e.g., in Jiu Valley and especially Greece is a front-runner in this regard, including in Western Macedonia) are already proving that municipalities can be key local energy drivers, too, and it can also have positive implications for energy poverty as well. Furthermore, the Greek legal framework, models used and supporting system for the development of renewables by investors, energy communities and citizens – including all the challenges experienced and mistakes made – presents a valuable lesson for enabling bottom-up energy initiatives through a broad menu of supportive mechanisms.

As mentioned previously, limited mandates on spatial planning and land ownership remain key challenges restricting the local-led deployment of renewables, as well as the broader expansion of many new/diverse economic activities, which could otherwise potentially be begun in coal regions (e.g., in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Ukraine and Bulgaria). Additionally, in the WBUA there is a general lack of adequate data about the technical and economic feasibility for various renewable energy sources. Therefore, proper research into wind potentials and solar irradiance – but also into geothermal characteristics, which remains a largely neglected niche with strong potential (e.g., in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia) – should be consistently supported and publicly shared to expedite the uptake of installations exploiting these sources.

Even if not (yet) taking the lead in the energy transition, WBUA municipalities can still find ways to drive it forward within the limits of their own (current) mandates in this sector – for example in Bosnia and Herzegovina the municipalities of Banovići and Živinice have already signed agreements with the state energy utility to install fields of photovoltaic panels onto municipal land. Likewise, local authorities can also develop programmes which support local citizen-oriented energy initiatives (e.g., energy efficiency renovations, smart energy initiatives, self-consumption/prosumerism or full-fledged energy communities). An inspiring example of pushing things towards such a pathway can be found in the late mayor of Živinice, who successfully lobbied for updates to the regional zoning laws which now reduce bureaucratic burdens for installing renewables – an effort which could help pave the way for community-led renewables in that whole region.

Conclusions

The Initiative for coal regions in transition for the Western Balkans and Ukraine, and its exchange programme in particular, has proven to be **politically and technically highly appreciated** by WBUA coal regions stakeholders, as well as across the EU. Moreover, the initiative can be seen as a solid success for raising awareness about the importance of the coal phase-out for stronger development across the WBUA and **alignment between the EU and these countries** (e.g., the [Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans](#)).

Stakeholders of the WBUA are now **more active than ever before**, participating in the conferences organised by the WBUA initiative and the Just Transition Platform, which serve as dual platforms for knowledge transfer, networking and voicing their own needs. In addition, joint projects have been triggered and/or were intensified due to the relationships initiated in the exchange programme (e.g., a joint study on youth in transition in Greece and North Macedonia).

Furthermore, the understanding of the **benefits for a cross-regional** sustainable energy analysis and concerted implementation has grown, including cross-border cooperation for the coal phase-out. Facilitation and coordination of stakeholders between neighbouring coal regions and countries were confirmed to be of significant importance for joint energy planning. It helps identify a more stable energy supply with a higher degree of renewables, flexibility and storage, as well as more coherent options for economic diversification and jobs. Synergies between energy markets should be leveraged, as well as existing instruments (like the WBUA initiative), to **advance the energy transition and support EU accession**.

Political will and phase-out targets on all governmental levels is one of the main facilitators and accelerators of the energy transition. However, as long as targets are underpinned by a clear step-by-step approach and pathway, the exact phase-out date can be secondary. Even without firm commitments or supportive framework conditions on a national level, across the WBUA **local commitment exists** and is already **sending the right signals** for attracting

new investments towards a sustainable energy system. This should be seen as an excellent opportunity for alliance building to accelerate the transition, particularly since some countries still remain slow, sceptical or even resisting the transformation of the energy system. Therefore, international actors like the **EC should intensify efforts** leveraging the just transition as a suitable instrument for environmental, social and economic alignment.

The **support of communities in locally-oriented planning** (through exchange with other regions, technical assistance, capacity-building, etc.) should be at the core of strategies to move forward in the WBUA. For Ukraine, it can be a centrepiece within local post-war development plans, and in the Western Balkans, synergies should be found with already existing processes (e.g., SECAPs or LEAPs) to actually implement them so that they complement just transition planning. Therefore, the EC should broaden the offer of **support-opportunities directly with local stakeholders** (e.g., public authorities, strong civil society organisations and other experts), similarly as was achieved through the work of the WBUA initiative with national to local authorities. It should continue to support local stakeholders, especially public authorities, to build capacities for preparing/managing projects, fundraising, etc.

Inaction for justly phasing out coal poses an **economic, social and political hazard**, potentially even a threat to democratic progress, which should be avoided. Populist rhetoric exploits fears about the transformation, delaying forward-oriented action. Meanwhile, even though mining/utility managers from exchanges are fully aware and often accept the coal phase-out, general corporate **policy remains tied to the status quo**, simply intending to continue activities until it stops being economically feasible or politically acceptable. Managers' main worry was not dismissing people, but rather to keep the operations running despite a lack of incoming employees interested in a profession with such an uncertain future. This points also to a need to focus skill development not only onto direct workers, but rather **skills for the whole community and a systematic update of the entire educational system**.

Structural transformation should be **planned on a horizon over the next 10-30 years**, and therefore requires a coherent approach with a vision, objectives, engagement, strategic and systemic interventions, monitoring, reporting and evaluation. The coal transition may take time, but **peer exchanges can accelerate planning and implementation** to avoid the repetition of mistakes. Transferable measures can be identified and adapted towards the local conditions, but the **facilitation of the transition must continue**, for instance: an integrated management cycle approach to TJTP or equivalent national planning, strategic communication/engagement and a self-reflective monitoring/evaluation process; properly-planned rehabilitation and repurposing; acceleration of truly renewable energy and efficiency (including of heating) at varying scales and types of ownership, and the avoidance of unsustainable, unproven and so-called bridging technology.

Coordination between the international partners of the WBUA initiative should continue, since their concerted action is required to address gaps in governance, funding and implementation, all of which still remain too fragmented and insufficient across the WBUA. More awareness and coordination are needed between public, private and civic investors to **break silos for leveraging synergies** of individual projects that are financed. Similarly, more discussion and emphasis on the decentralisation and democratisation of energy in the WBUA is desirable to

shape respective framework conditions that can accelerate investments and implementation.

It follows, and represents a direct reflection of a very common refrain from every single exchange, that **WBUA regions would benefit tremendously from a suitable extension of the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM)**. Though Ukraine's different framework conditions than Western Balkan ones may require a separate or parallel approach, it could be either a direct integration into the EU framework or through an initiative mirroring the EU mechanism. Obviously, there remain legitimate questions about how it might function, much less be funded, as well as if WBUA regions are truly prepared to follow a similar pathway of developing a TJTP, or equivalent national strategy, and ready to manage dedicated public and private investments for a just transition **meaningfully addressing governance and socio-economic aspects, as well as the infrastructural ones** which tend to be their main focus. Nonetheless, lessons so far point to an **urgent need to bolster the WBUA coal regions** through suitable programmes. Similar approaches to how the JTM does (i.e., alongside **technical assistance, peer exchange and an experts' platform**) albeit tailored to the WBUA context of topics and languages, are seen by local stakeholders as the right way forward. At the least, such a mechanism is needed to send **strong signals to WBUA communities that they will not be left behind**.



Figure 10. Artistic exhibit in "Neue Zeche Westerholt", Gelsenkirchen (Germany), September 2023.

(Source: WBUA initiative secretariat, photographed by Linnéa Cullman)



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