



EU coal regions exchange programme

Exchange between Midlands (IE) and Western Macedonia (EL)

exchangeEU

About the exchangeEU programme

exchangeEU is the exchange programme for coal, lignite, peat, and oil shale (coal+) regions in transition in the European Union (EU). The programme is part of the Coal Regions in Transition (CRiT) initiative and implemented by the European Commission.

Recognising the need for accelerating a just and low-carbon energy transition in Europe, exchangeEU facilitates cooperation and peer-to-peer learning amongst EU coal+ regions to foster the implementation of Just Energy Transition strategies. The key objective is to support EU coal+ regions to decarbonise their energy systems while protecting workers and communities through economic diversification and technological innovation.

During the programme, participating regions share experiences and work together on overcoming current challenges they face in their Just Transition processes. As such, exchangeEU opens the way for building a broad network of practitioners.



18 coal+ regions in transition have been selected to participate



The matching process resulted in **8 exchanges**, including 4 pairs of regions and 4 triangles of regions



The participating regions represent a total of **12 EU Member States**: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain

Exchange cornerstones

November – December 2021
Call for applications and virtual pre-matchmaking sessions

February – March 2022
Evaluation, selection and matchmaking

May – July 2022
Co-creating the agenda and organisation

July – October 2022
Evaluation and reflections on lessons learnt

Promotion

Application

Assessment

Launch

Scheduling

Implementation

Follow-up

January 2022
Submission of individual or joint applications

April 2022
Follow-up calls and kick-offs

June – October 2022
Study visits

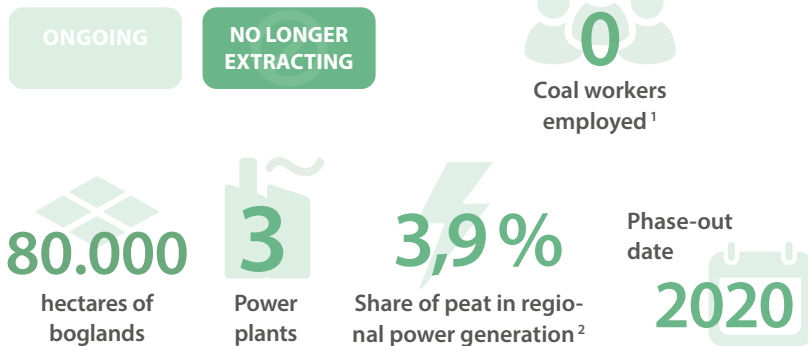
Region profiles

Towards a just transition away from coal+

This match consists of two European regions which are at different stages of their transitioning process and who are phasing out different energy carriers: Industrial peat harvesting ceased in the Irish Midlands in 2020, while Western Macedonia in Greece plans to phase out coal by 2028.

MIDLANDS (IE)

State of phasing out peat extraction

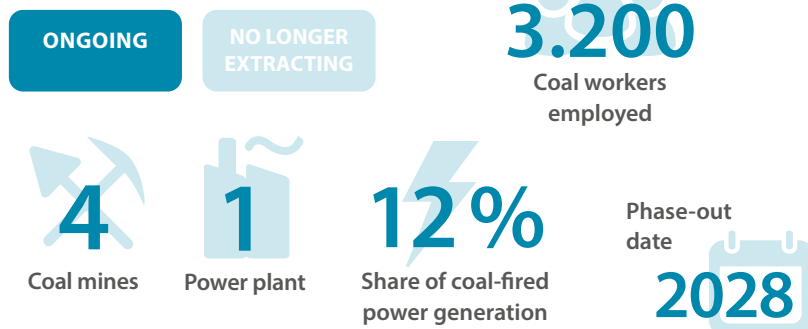


State of Just Energy Transition

Ireland set out a target to produce up to 80% of its electricity from renewable sources and to deliver a 51% reduction in GHG emissions by 2030. Ireland has extensive peat resources, most of them in Midland Region. The peatlands were developed and managed by the publicly owned company Bord na Móna. They announced accelerating their decarbonisation programme with cessation of industrial peat harvesting in 2020. Industrial-scale peat extraction of peat has been used both to supply peat burning power plants and the production of peat briquettes for domestic heating. To enable the transition, some companies began firing peat incinerators with biomass blends already years before the planned cessation. However, in general, Ireland is relying on wind energy as a renewable substitute in the future.

WESTERN MACEDONIA (EL)

State of phasing out brown coal (lignite)



State of Just Energy Transition

Greece has cut its use of coal quickly in recent years, down from 43% six years ago to 12% in 2021. In 2019, the Greek government decided to shut down all lignite plants by 2028, and to accelerate the de-lignification by withdrawing 80% of installed capacity by 2023. Western Macedonia is an industrial area, in which four surface lignite mines are operating and contributing to ten per cent of national electricity generation (2021).

¹ 2.000 formerly employed workers

² As of 2020

Main challenges

- To facilitate the economic transition of the region: career change of workers and corporate diversification for companies
- To reduce energy poverty and coal dependency
- To develop effective reskilling programmes for miners to transition to new activities
- To convince citizens to take part in the transition, including young people and non-governmental organisations

Focus topics



Social fabric and community

The decarbonisation of electricity generation poses a major challenge to the community participation and acceptance in both regions. The participants visited various community projects that were funded by the National Just Transition Fund (JTF) to empower the affected communities. The participants discussed with a youth organization their perspectives on Just Transition, outlook for the future and new opportunities replacing traditional work.



Economic diversification and regional development

The exchange participants focused on strategies for economic diversification. Thus, representatives of different companies and SMEs, for instance, presented their innovative solutions for creating new jobs. In addition, participants visited community-driven projects for alternative employment. They also shared experiences setting up re-skilling and social programmes for miners/peat workers and providing attractive jobs for young people.

Study visit to the municipality of Tullamore in the Midlands region in Ireland

The municipality of Tullamore in the Midlands region in Ireland welcomed a delegation from Western Macedonia in Greece for a two-day long exchange visit. This exchange brought together two quite different regions. While the Midlands region in Ireland recently ended carbon intensive peat extraction for electricity production in 2021, Greece's coal phase-out will take place in 2028. Participants focussed their discussions on how to create alternative employment options in the region and how to ensure community engagement in the transformation process. During the workshops, the Greek delegation learned about various projects being implemented by the Midlands Region Transition Team. Additionally, site visits were made to major projects funded within the framework of the National JTF to showcase developments in the Midlands region and to discuss how they could be applied to the situation in Western Macedonia. The projects showed inclusive and innovative ideas of community engagement, always with the aim to develop new and decent jobs for people of the community. During the visits, participants discovered and discussed different ways of combining community engagement with the creation of new jobs. The different formats of the projects were particularly impressive:

- In Kilcormac, a community hall primarily serves as an umbrella organisation for all groups of the town and as a meeting place for the people, providing a bike rental, a tea room and a tourist office, while at the same time creating additional jobs.
- The Lough Boora Discovery Park turns the rewetted bogs into a tourist attraction with cycling and walking trails and a modern bike rail amenity.
- The Access for All project in Lanesboro/Ballyleague offers boat tours by disabled people for disabled people, creating inclusive jobs and attracting thousands of visitors per year.

MIDLANDS (IE)

Status	Visiting region	Hosting region
Main Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offaly County Council, • Midlands Region Transition Team, • Midlands Local Authorities, • Midlands Regional Skills Forum, • Local Enterprise Office (LEO) Longford, • Laois Offaly Education & Training Board (LOETB), • National Ministry of the Environment, Climate & Communications 	
Shared insights	Building community engagement, building up tourism, communicating with citizens and youth	

WESTERN MACEDONIA (EL)

Status	Visiting region	Hosting region
Main Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just Transition Institute Greece (JTIG), • University of Western Macedonia 	
Shared insights	Attracting public investment, public funding schemes	

Site visit to The Access for All project in Lanesboro/Ballyleague which offers boat trips and other services for disabled persons next to the closed power station. Photo by Kostantinos Karamarkos



Learnings

- ✓ Good, constant, and in-person collaboration between regional stakeholders is key for a successful transformation as they all work for a common goal.
- ✓ Local champions (e.g. boards of experienced and well-connected experts in different fields) can bring forward important projects.
- ✓ Small projects can act as catalyzers for more projects, inspiring others and build on the experience.
- ✓ Reaching out to other regions (collaboration and co-operation) with similar projects are highly beneficial, can avoid mistakes and save time.

Hands-on recommendations

- + **Be engaged:** By revitalizing former peat and coal mining sites and making them accessible to the public you showcase that the transition process is possible and have interesting and beneficial outcomes for the community.
- + **Be creative:** There are successful ways for coal and peat regions to preserve their heritage and head towards innovation, sustainability, and economic welfare. Formerly industrial regions can be transformed into cultural hubs, tourist attractions and community centers.
- + **Be inclusive:** Ensure that all stakeholders and citizens affected by coal phase-out and regional redevelopment are a part of the planning and decision-making process so that their needs can be addressed.



“We were amazed by the case studies we’ve found here because our purpose of the exchange was to explore the just transition preparation of the Midlands regions. We had a lot of fruitful discussions with local authorities and stakeholders and had some exciting case studies.”

Kostas Karamarkos, Strategic Planner at Just Transition Institute Greece, Western Macedonia, Greece



“The exchange process is extremely valuable, as we have learned that we are not alone, we are one of many regions across Europe that are undergoing transition at this time. We have had the opportunity to exchange best practices in respect of Community Engagement.”

Sarah Morgan, Programme Manager Midlands Regional Transition Team (MRTT), Midlands, Ireland



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