



EU coal regions exchange programme

Exchange between Upper Nitra Region (SK), Eastern Cohesion Region (SI), Jiu Valley (RO)

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

Promotion

February – March 2022
Evaluation, selection and matchmaking

Assessment

May – July 2022
Co-creating the agenda and organisation

Scheduling

July – October 2022
Evaluation and reflections on lessons learnt

Follow-up

January 2022
Submission of individual or joint applications

April 2022
Follow-up calls and kick-offs

June – October 2022
Study visits

Application

Launch

Implementation

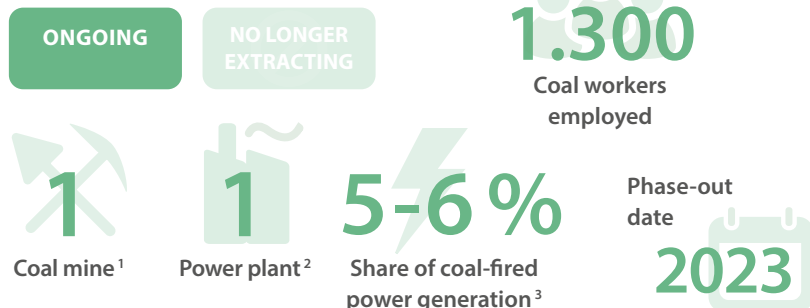
Region profiles

Towards a just transition away from coal+

This match consists of three Eastern European regions that are beginning to transition towards a just and low-carbon future: The Upper Nitra Region plans to phase-out coal by the end of 2023. Both, the Eastern Cohesion Region and Jiu Valley plan to exit coal by 2032/2033.

UPPER NITRA REGION (SK)

State of phasing out brown coal (lignite)

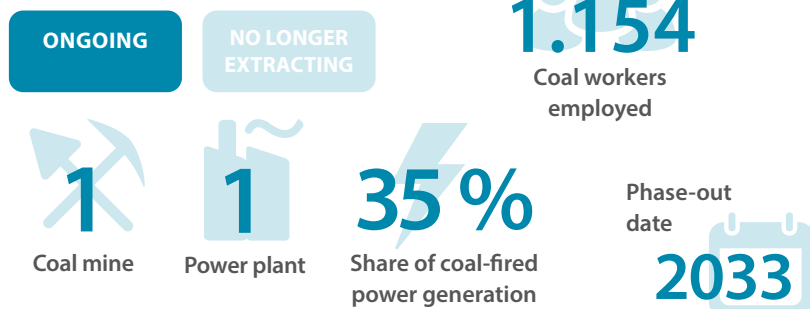


State of Just Energy Transition

The Slovak Republic will end electricity production from domestic brown coal by the end of 2023. Accordingly, Upper Nitra currently focusses on becoming cleaner. Lighthouse projects consist of a new central heating system fuelled mainly by renewable energies with a thermal output of 36 MW and the construction of solar plants with a total output of around 50 MW. Some are connected to storage systems with a capacity of up to 8 MW.

EASTERN COHESION REGION (SI)

State of phasing out brown coal (lignite)

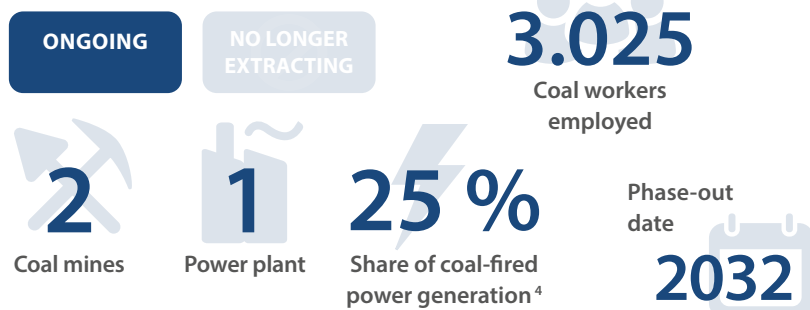


State of Just Energy Transition

Velenje was chosen to participate in the EU Mission 'Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities' and committed to become climate neutral by 2030. The region's main projects included in the Territorial Just Transition Plan are related to solutions on district heating and mining, revitalisation of former power plant sites and the development of new business areas.

JIU VALLEY (RO)

State of phasing out hard coal (anthracite)



State of Just Energy Transition

Jiu Valley takes part in Romania's Territorial Just Transition Plan. The program is currently in its final stage of approval at the EU level. With support from the EC STARTS initiative the region designed multiple projects to be implemented through the Just Transition Fund. These projects aim for Jiu Valley to become a more inclusive, economically diverse and sustainable region.

¹ Two coal mines have already been closed.
² The installed output is of 264 MW/h.

³ Reference year is 2021.
⁴ Referred to the national share of coal (in Romania).

Main challenges

- In order to prevent mass layoffs of miners and increasing unemployment rates in affected regions, massive job and re-skilling programmes need to be developed.
- Growing migration of young people from mining to urban areas makes projects of rural development and community revitalisation increasingly urgent.
- Current structural capacity barriers to implement low carbon (district) heating systems prevent regions to significantly decrease emissions.
- Just Transition projects require a large amount of private investments in mining regions which is currently lacking.

Focus topics



Economic diversification and regional development

At the exchange participants focused on strategies for economic diversification. Representatives of mining companies, for instance, explored innovative solutions for making use of former mining sites. They also shared experiences on how to set up re-skilling and social programmes for miners and to provide attractive jobs for young people.



Clean energy transition

The decarbonisation of district heating systems poses a major challenge in all three regions. The participants visited a future site for district heating based on renewable energy sources. They discussed the need to attract customers and enhancing energy efficiency.

Study visit to the municipality of Prievidza in the Upper Nitra Region in Slovakia

The municipality of Prievidza in the region of Upper Nitra in Slovakia welcomed delegations from the municipality of Velenje in the Eastern Cohesion Region in Slovenia and from Jiu Valley in Romania for a two-day exchange visit.

Participants discussed opportunities for mining companies to diversify their activities in order to gradually replace coal-related activities with clean energy and innovative solutions. Site visits were underpinned by discussions with best-practice examples on the ground. Participants visited an indoor tomato farm which utilizes thermal energy from mining water. They were also brought to a former mining site where a district heating centre will be constructed to supply heat using renewable energy sources.

Since the heating sector significantly contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, participants reflected on possibilities to decarbonise the heating system. Low carbon district heating solutions were considered highly effective, especially combined with efforts to reduce the primary energy use of customers. The latter could be reached by raising social awareness and provide financial incentives through changes in the legal framework.

Another topic discussed during the exchange is related to the need of supporting former miners and their families after coal mines have been closed. Participants visited a special contact centre which offers miners social, legal, health and psychological consultations as well as support to find re-training courses. They were also introduced to a dual education programme that allows high school students in Prievidza to do an apprenticeship in the development centre of an automotive supplier company.

UPPER NITRA REGION (SK)

Status	Visiting region	Hosting region
Main Actors		Municipality of Prievidza, Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Information of the Slovak Republic, CEE Bankwatch Network - Priatelja Zeme CEPA
Shared insights		Business diversification for local mining, district heating, support schemes for miners, dual education programme for high school students

EASTERN COHESION REGION (SI)

Status	Visiting region	Hosting region
Main Actors		Municipality of Velenje
Shared insights		Attracting private investment, building up tourism, communicating with the local public

JIU VALLEY (RO)

Status	Visiting region	Hosting region
Main Actors		Jiu Valley Social Institute Association (AISVJ), Municipality of Petrița, Jiu Valley Integrated Territorial Development Association
Shared insights		Social programmes, learnings from experience with district heating

Site visit to an indoor tomato farm which utilizes thermal energy from mining water. Photo by Linda Beyschlag



Learnings

- ✓ To build a strong base for the Just Energy Transition process, effective collaboration between public authorities (local, regional and national), businesses, educational institutions and civil society organisations needs to start with co-creating a vision for the future and end with the implementation of complex projects.
- ✓ Coal mining is an integral part of the local heritage and, thus, of the community's identity. To gain public support for phasing-out coal requires much sensitivity.
- ✓ In order for re-skilling and social programmes to foster a Just Transition, policymakers need to holistically consider the effects of phasing out coal on multiple dimensions of miners' lives, such as their physical health and sense of identity, not just their competencies.
- ✓ District heating solutions must go hand in hand with projects focused on enhancing energy efficiency to ensure all energy produced from district heating systems is used as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Hands-on recommendations

- + Follow a participatory bottom-up approach to define needs and priorities of citizens affected by the coal phase-out.
- + When creating a transformation strategy, focus on setting priorities in line with a vision. Further, ensure continuity in actions and projects undertaken as part of the Just Transition process.
- + Keep track of Just Transition activities and keep citizens informed. This way, they are assured that their specific problems are considered, and their needs are being addressed.
- + Foster public-private partnerships to attract investment and to set up innovative education systems such as dual education programmes.
- + Beware that legal conditions might lead to individual customers disconnecting from district heating due to decentralised options being cheaper.
- + Seek opportunities to revitalize former mining sites rather than tearing them down to preserve the mining heritage that is part of the community identity.



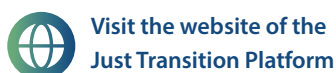
"I believe that the exchange was useful for both, host and guests. To see best practices developed on the ground, to meet new people who implemented them and to jointly discuss the future is empowering."

Alexandru Kelemen,
Jiu Valley Integrated Territorial
Development Association, Romania



"It was great to see that even though we're different, we have very similar challenges. We have experienced new ideas and established contacts with whom we hope to cooperate in the future."

Vanesa Begić,
Municipality of Velenje, Slovenia



exchangeEU is part of the [Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition \(CRiT\)](#)