



EU coal regions exchange programme

Exchange between Western Macedonia (EL) Stara Zagora (BG)

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

Application

Assessment

May – July 2022
Co-creating the agenda and organisation

Launch

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

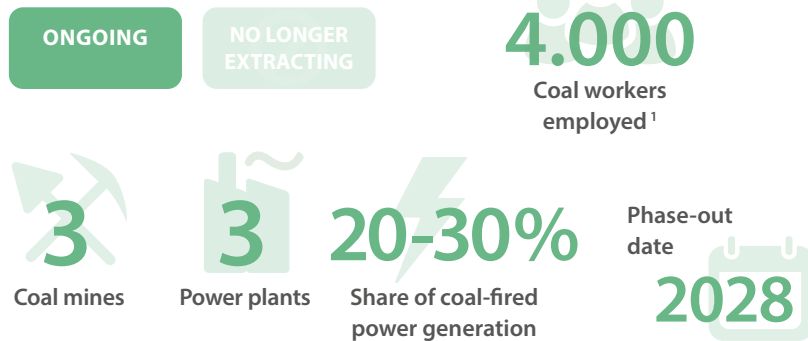
Region profiles

Towards a just transition away from coal+

Considering the need to mitigate carbon emissions at greater scope and pace, the regions of Western Macedonia (Greece) and Stara Zagora (Bulgaria) are determined to exit coal mining and coal-based energy production gradually. Greece is planning to phase-out coal by 2028 at the latest and Bulgaria by 2038.

WESTERN MACEDONIA (EL)

State of phasing out brown coal (lignite)



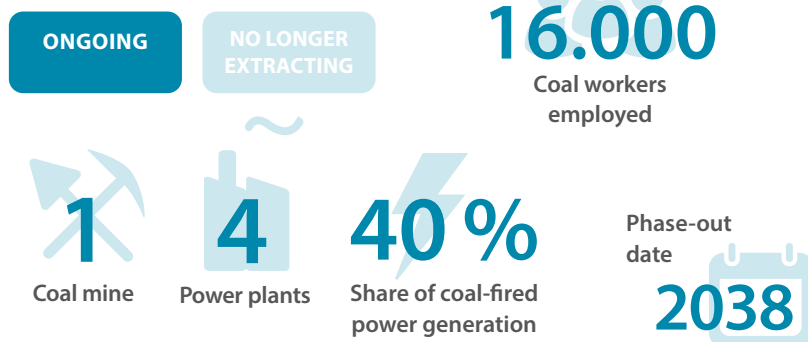
State of Just Energy Transition

The European Commission approved Greece's Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP) in June 2022. The TJTP includes three Just Transition Development Plans for three Greek regions. For Western Macedonia the main objective is to transform the region into a clean energy hub to attract investments. The transformation is divided into six pillars of growth:

1. Strengthening and promotion of entrepreneurship
2. Energy transition and climate neutrality
3. Adjustment of land uses in the lignite fields and the promotion of the circular economy
4. Just Transition
5. Integrated small-scale interventions
6. Technical assistance

STARA ZAGORA (BG)

State of phasing out brown coal (lignite)



State of Just Energy Transition

Bulgaria is currently elaborating three TJTPs for its most carbon intensive regions – Pernik, Kyustendil and Stara Zagora.

The TJTP for Stara Zagora is expected to be finalised in the coming months. It grounds on three strategic dimensions:

1. Industry for sustainable energy solutions
2. Social and employment support
3. Diversification of the local economy

¹ 4,500 are directly employed in coal mining and power production. Another 11,000 to 11,500 are indirectly employed in the field of good supply and services.

Main challenges

- Due to many decades of lignite mining the regions have become locked into hydrocarbon-intensive technologies and infrastructures. Attempts to shift towards zero-emitting substitutes and other economic branches are proving difficult.
- The regions are facing structural weaknesses, such as increasing unemployment, brain drain due to a lack of alternatives to the coal industry, low diversification of production models and low innovation rates.
- Local citizens still lack awareness about the long-term consequences of greenhouse gas emissions for their future livelihoods. This makes it even more difficult to successfully increase their engagement in the Just Transition (JT) process.

Focus topics



Transition governance and strategy

Greece has been one of the first countries to finalise its TJTP, which was approved by the European Commission in June 2022. Stara Zagora, on the other hand, is still in the process of drafting its TJTP. Thus, the Bulgarian region was keen to learn from the Greeks' experience on how to successfully develop the TJTP from concept to final proposal.



Social fabric and community

To increase public awareness for the need of phasing out fossil fuels remains a great challenge for Western Macedonia's and Stara Zagora's local authorities. Therefore, the exchange constituted a good opportunity to jointly think about strategies and activities to ramp up citizen engagement levels on the ground.

Study visit in Western Macedonia, Greece

To effectively leverage JT funds at the local level, Western Macedonia and Stara Zagora exchanged practical tips of how to elaborate and submit thoughtful and transformative TJTPs to unlock support under the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM). Western Macedonian representatives gave an overview over how to successfully render a TJTP, outlining four main building blocks: First, a clear description of the transition process to reach climate neutrality; second, a thorough evaluation of the socio-economic and environmental impacts on the affected areas; third, a detailed map of all partners and stakeholders involved in the JT process; fourth, a monitoring strategy including comprehensible evaluation measures and indicators.

Delegates from Stara Zagora took the opportunity to present their TJTP draft which grounds on two strategic pillars: first, creating interregional centers for vocational training and education for coal workers to address unemployment; second, to attract more investments from the private sector aiming for the diversification of the local economy. Opportunities for improvement were identified subsequently. Important for evaluating the activities' success quantitative and qualitative indicators need still to be included in the plan. Another interesting measure mentioned was the elaboration of a 'skills map' ideally carried out by unions and regional employer organizations to identify the skillset of the local workforce, thus, giving local authorities clearer guidance on which re-skilling programmes to set up.

Apart from discussing good practices related to developing strong TJTPs, the group also exchanged ideas on how to encourage more meaningful and numerous participation opportunities for citizens affected by the coal phase-out. During a brainstorming session a variety of measures were gathered, for example, to initiate an open dialogue at all levels with various stakeholders, to increase the state funding for programmes to support vulnerable groups, or to inform local businesses and the workforce about new investment and job opportunities.

WESTERN MACEDONIA (EL)

| Status | Visiting region | Hosting region |
|------------------------|---|----------------|
| Main Actors | Research institution, regional authorities | |
| Shared insights | Preparation of the TJTP, energy communities and smart agriculture | |

STARA ZAGORA (BG)

| Status | Visiting region | Hosting region |
|------------------------|---|----------------|
| Main Actors | Representatives from regional authorities, regional economic development agency | |
| Shared insights | Preparation of the TJTP, stakeholder engagement | |

Site visit at Florina's open-pit mine in Western Macedonia.
Fotos by Besa Maraj and Janina Grimm-Huber



Learnings

- ✓ **Data is key:** The TJTP should be developed based on high quality, independent and objective data analysis to adequately assess challenges and opportunities for the implementation of JT projects in (former) coal-mining regions.
- ✓ **Monitoring and evaluation need to be incorporated into the TJTP:** The plan should be monitored and evaluated through meaningful partnerships that engage all stakeholders in an open, inclusive process.
- ✓ **All stakeholders need to be involved in the transition process:** Crucial to a successful and fair energy transition is the participation of affected stakeholders in the planning processes for a just energy transition, the transparency of political engagement, and the building of trust in the local community.

Hands-on recommendations

- + **Develop a vivid start-up ecosystem as engine of innovation and job creation:** to attract start-ups and small tech companies to former coal regions, local and regional public authorities should invest in and closely cooperate with universities and research bodies. Simultaneously, they need to build infrastructure to ensure future growth and to retain a highly-trained local workforce.
- + **Support energy communities:** energy communities can play a key role in providing access to renewable energy for the most affected groups of society. To expand the creation of energy communities, administrative barriers should be removed and specific financing instruments for energy communities need to be created.
- + **Identify and develop new participatory approaches:** Participation is more than executing communication campaigns. To truly promote citizen participation expand your activity portfolio to a wider range of participatory tools, like citizen dialogues or stakeholder meetings.



“The exchangeEU programme is a great way to investigate a region that faces similar challenges of just transition and phasing out coal. The direct contact with local stakeholders allowed us to dive into the topic even deeper and broaden my vision about the challenges we are all observing.”

Sofia Savova
Stara Zagora Regional Economic
Development Agency, Bulgaria



“What I have liked most in our exchange was sharing our insights on a variety of issues and networking with different stakeholders, hopefully resulting in long-term connections and a forthcoming co-operation that can accelerate the clean energy transition to our regions.”

Konstantina Togaridou
Digital Communication Network
Global, Greece



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