



EU coal regions exchange programme

Exchange between the Rhenish Region (DE) and Eastern Wielkopolska (PL)

exchangeEU

Study visit in Jülich, Germany

Delegations from the Rhenish Region and Eastern Wielkopolska met in Jülich to exchange best practices on **transition governance and economic diversification**. The Polish delegation, hosted by the Zukunftsagentur, consisted of representatives from the Green Future Institute Foundation, local government and youth associations. Discussions over two days focused on the challenge of developing a compelling regional identity to engage society, attract young people and gain support from businesses and stakeholders. Although the **governance structures** in the regions were superficially different, their organisations performed similar functions in supporting public participation and project development. The Zukunftsagentur, which works in close cooperation with municipalities and the national government, manages the **participation process** and implements projects. In Eastern Wielkopolska, the transition governance process emerged from the initiative of local activists and grew organically, becoming a prominent example of a bottom-up **Just Transition** process facilitated by a local NGO. To gain insight into the physical impacts of transition governance, participants visited a nearby lignite mine and reclamation areas. The former village of **Morschenich**, which will no longer be used for mining, illustrates the long-term impact of mining on surrounding communities. In terms of **economic diversification**, the regions highlighted the use of assets such as landscape, knowledge and institutions. Both regions emphasised the role that large reclaimed areas can play for recreation, cultural projects and investment. Youth representatives from Eastern Wielkopolska led sessions on economic diversification and best practices in **youth engagement**. The exchange provided valuable inspiration for the regions as they navigate their transitions.

Photo: Representatives from the Rhenish Region and Eastern Wielkopolska at the Future Agency, Photographer: Monika Soppenberg (Zukunftsagentur).

RHEINISH REGION, GERMANY

Roles	Hosting region	Mentor in respective fields of expertise
Main actors involved	Representatives of the Zukunftsagentur (regional agency coordinating the communes in implementing the TJTP), representatives from municipalities in transition (Managers for Structural Change)	
Field of expertise	Governance of public participation processes, project identification and development	

EASTERN WIELKOPOLSKA, POLAND

Roles	Visiting region	Mentor in respective fields of expertise
Main actors involved	CEO of the Green Future Institute Foundation (local NGO) and youth representatives (youth council, youth association)	
Field of expertise	Mobilisation of stakeholders for the Just Transition (JT) process, involvement of NGO, bottom-up activities, youth engagement	



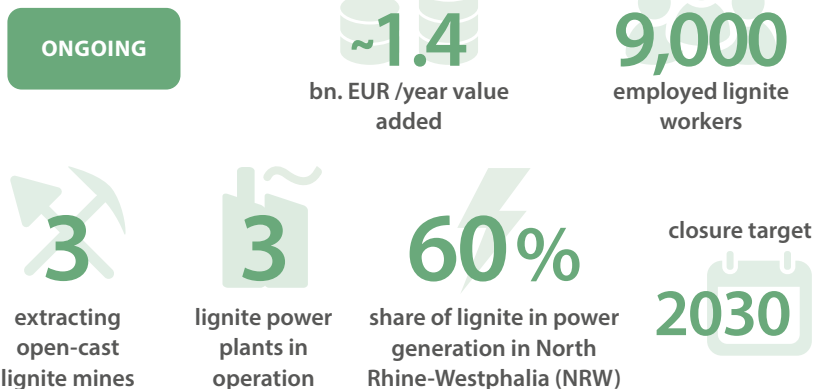
Region profiles

Towards a just transition away from coal+

This exchange brought together two Central European regions, Rheinish Region and Eastern Wielkopolska, nearing their respective coal phase-out dates. Rheinish Region plans to diversify the economy, currently reliant on lignite, by emphasizing chemicals, manufacturing, and R&D. Eastern Wielkopolska exceeds national climate targets and aims for a dynamic, zero carbon, circular economy.

RHEINISH REGION, GERMANY

State of phasing out coal¹



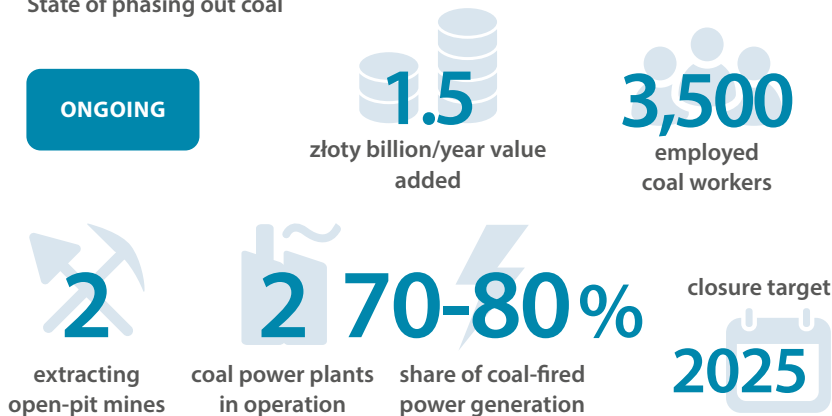
¹ Territorially plan of transition for lignite mine Lausitz (Brandenburg), 2021-2027.

State of Just Energy Transition

Rheinish Region is Germany's biggest lignite mining area, accounting for over half of the country's lignite production and power plant capacity. The region faces significant transition challenges, including addressing negative demographic effects, economic stagnation, skills shortages, and environmental degradation. To overcome these challenges, the region is focused on diversifying and modernising its regional economy through digitalisation and support of climate-friendly businesses. Its goal is to lead Europe in developing and applying technologies for a climate-neutral industry and economy in line with the European Green Deal.

EASTERN WIELKOPOLSKA, POLAND

State of phasing out coal



State of Just Energy Transition

Eastern Wielkopolska pursues climate neutrality by 2040 and a coal phase-out by 2030, surpassing national strategies (2049). In the region, the shift away from lignite mining and burning by 2030 has a significant impact on the local economy and job market, as they used to be the cornerstone of the local economy. Therefore, corresponding measures include energy efficiency improvements, investment in renewable energies incl. green hydrogen and clean mobility. The regional transformation focuses on 1. a zero-carbon, circular economy, 2. improving quality of life (environment restoration, smart transport, reducing energy poverty) and 3. strong society (labour market measures, social support services).

Common challenges

Both regions are facing common challenges:

- Selective migration of inhabitants to larger cities in the neighbouring regions mainly out of economic reasons;
- Creating a sense of "ownership" for the transition and the future among the local society and enterprises – the regions find it difficult to create a successful, convincing narrative;
- Both regions face land contamination from open-pit mining, requiring extensive recultivation. These vast areas pose financial and environmental challenges for restoration;
- Historical reliance on lignite creates the need for economic diversification. Attracting new investors and establishing new industries in the region is challenging due to the short time-line.

Focus topics

Both regions are implementing their approved Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs), exchanging best practices and governance challenges. Youth engagement in the transition and creating convincing narratives for young people were key topics discussed.



Transition governance

Both organisations engaged in the exchange serve as regional agencies supporting the transition process. Despite varying scopes of responsibilities, mandate, and structure, both play a vital role in the regional transition governance as they coordinate stakeholders and initiate relevant projects. The regions shared their experiences and challenges on the governance aspects.



Economic diversification with focus on making the region attractive for young people

Economic diversification poses a key challenge for transitioning regions previously dominated by mining and power plant companies. Thus, they must attract alternative industries while creating a compelling vision of the future for young people in the region.

Recommendations

- + Ensure successful youth engagement by engaging in their own environments (schools, youth associations); clearly communicating expectations; collaborating with youth association spokespersons for effective communication and emphasising a learning approach that values insights from young people;
- + Make the region attractive for youth by investing in education, providing career guidance, offering internship and job opportunities, affordable housing, access to childcare facilities, ensuring good quality public services and showcasing the region's interest in their development;
- + Preserve industrial heritage: Keep coal-era rail infrastructure to ease congestion and maintain industrial character. Preserve cultural/industrial elements like a machine park as symbolic of the region's identity. Emphasize narratives while highlighting existing potential, tangible assets, and citizen ownership. Foster positive narratives of structural change and transition, encouraging engagement;
- + Encourage economy support measures: A holistic approach to workforce support is crucial for addressing diverse target groups. Both regions have implemented programmes for affected employees, existing SMEs and a future innovative economy.



„Just Transition in lignite mining regions is all about space and how the space will be governed for the environment, the society and the economy.“

Agata Kuźmińska
CEO of GFIF, Konin



“The transition process is for the miners, but the transition outcomes are for the youth.“

Piotr Czerniejewski
Young Locals Association, Konin, Poland

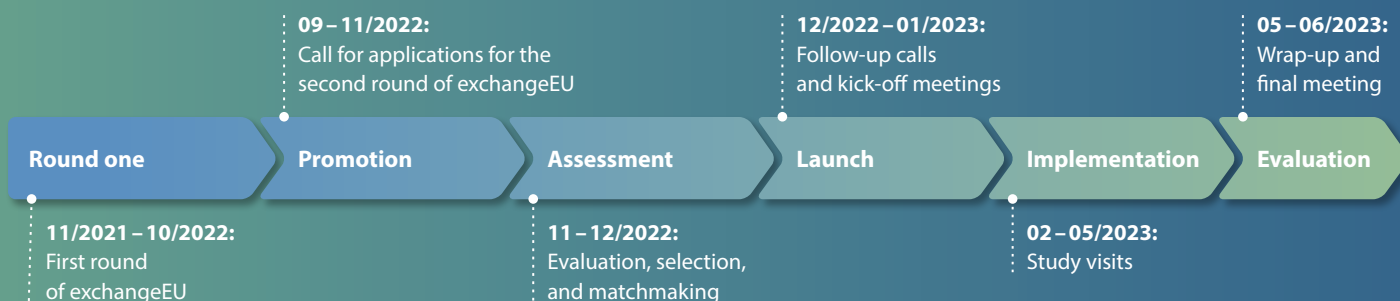
Learnings

- ✓ Economic development can be successful if based on regional strengths;
- ✓ In lignite mining regions, spatial considerations are crucial for a successful transition. Such considerations include recultivating mining areas, preserving the natural landscape and finding space for agriculture as well as businesses;
- ✓ A crucial element for a transition in coal-dependent regions is developing a compelling narrative that can be effectively communicated to enterprises and all segments of society. This vision should inspire action, create ownership, foster willingness to participate, and acknowledge that not all regions can follow the same path;
- ✓ Just Transition is not only about energy transition, but also about regional development in general;
- ✓ The outcome of the transition will impact the current youth; hence their perspective and participation are key to shaping the future;
- ✓ Multiple youth engagement processes consistently emphasize the importance of meeting basic needs to retain young people in the region, such as cultural offerings and public transportation.

Programme development

exchangeEU consists of two exchange rounds, spanning from November 2021 to June 2023. The first round took place from November 2021 until October 2022, the second round launched in November 2022. In each round, candidate regions are fittingly paired according to their Just Transition and coal phase-out trajectories.

Subsequently, the matched regions collaborate closely on developing a study visit to one of the regions based on their own needs and topic interests. Assigned exchange facilitators support them throughout the process.



About exchangeEU

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.

Outcomes of second application round



In total **17 coal+ regions** in transition have been selected to participate



The matching process resulted in **9 exchanges**, including 5 region pairs and 4 region triangles



The participating regions represent a total of **11 EU Member States**: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain



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