

Exploring pathways for future development of post-coal mining areas

exchangeEU: final study visit implemented in Stara Zagora (Bulgaria)

From April 4-5, the region of Stara Zagora in Bulgaria welcomed a delegation from Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic). The visit was part of the exchangeEU programme and focused on digitalization and innovation, the recultivation of coal mining areas for tourism, and renewable energy strategies. The regions came together to share best practices and develop new ideas and projects of how to overcome prevailing challenges on their just transition pathways, particularly concerning the elevation of both regions after the coal era.

Digitalization and innovation

The development of a digital economy to attract new businesses, start-ups and SMEs for economic diversification are key topics in both regions to combat depopulation where the regions exchanged on their respective strategies: In 2021, Stara Zagora created the Zagore European Digital Innovation Hub. This Hub brings together actors from academia, businesses and NGOs to deliver a number of core services. These include digital skills and training and support for SMEs and other businesses to find investment opportunities. Karlovy Vary presented the Czech e-government strategy, which is widely used and includes, among others, a subsidy portal to make information on subsidies widely and easily accessible.

Recultivation of post-mining areas for tourism

Digitalization also played an important role in the second focus topic of the exchange in which the regions discussed about the recultivation of the wider mining areas for tourism. Stara Zagora is well known in- and outside of Bulgaria for its energy production. But the region also has a rich history and consequently major potential for tourism which is currently left unexplored. This untapped potential was illustrated through site visits to the Regional History Museum and Neolithic dwellings. In contrast, Karlovy Vary has developed a flourishing tourism industry, offering a broad range of activities from glamping to thermal spas and UNESCO cultural heritage sites in the region. The delegation shared how they integrated tourism into other existing industries in the region, such as ceramics, porcelain and glass, as well as best practices like a shared cultural calendar, or the innovation of existing touristic attractions through digitalization or multipurpose use, e.g. a museum during the day and a music venue at night. These served as an inspiration on how to elevate Stara Zagora's touristic potential.

Renewable energy strategies

Currently, the electricity mix of both regions is dominated by coal and nuclear energy. Within the third topic, the delegations thus focused on exploring approaches to replace those fossil fuels with renewable energies as their main energy sources. This topic is currently still in its infancy in both regions. However, while Stara Zagora already has mature plans for the creation of a Hydrogen Valley, intended to accelerate the decarbonization in the region, the exchange on how to approach this topic proved valuable for both delegations and the regions discussed a potential partnership to be explored in the future.

Future opportunities for collaboration

Regardless of the multiple challenges identified during the exchange, the participants took the opportunity to learn from each other's experiences and lay the foundation for a fruitful collaboration. Following the exchange, the regions are planning to meet again in Karlovy Vary in the context of the Annual Political dialogue and jointly participate at the European week of cities and regions in October this year.