

SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION (STSM) SCIENTIFIC REPORT

This report is submitted for approval by the STSM applicant to the STSM coordinator

Action number: CA16232

STSM title: Just transitions in Southeastern Europe

STSM start and end date: 14/05/2021 to 11/08/2021

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PURPOSE OF THE STSM:

This STSM explored the spatial aspects of just transition processes in Southeastern Europe – particularly the Western Balkans – with a strong emphasis on the everyday dimensions of efforts to promote a coal phase out in the region. I was particularly interested in examining how elements of lived experience and energy poverty intersect with broader policy initiatives to move away from fossil fuel production.

An important element of the STSM were the decision-making, statutory, legal and policy dimensions of energy reforms – particularly the procedures and pathways through which energy reform decisions are made, and the framing of vulnerable households in this regard (responding, in part, to the question, ‘who’ is the nobody left behind in just transition policy). I was interrogated the tensions between reactive and proactive measures. I explored how and to what extent any targeted skills training, industrial transition support as well as geographically focused public spending are happening in advance (this would count as ‘proactive measures’) as opposed to considering more ‘reactive’ policies such as income support, retraining and career support, job transfers, pension bridging and workforce transition plans.

The fellowship aimed to contribute to ENGAGER’s activities through several pathways. It was positioned as a ‘linking debates’ STSM, with a clear purpose to focus on the growing science-policy nexus between just transitions and energy poverty. In a wider sense, the STSM aimed to build connections to wider debates around regional inequality, economic restructuring, housing transformations and socio-environmental justice. This is a central mandate of ENGAGER’s WG4, to whose work I started contributing more actively. I hope that the STSM will result in a report that can be used as a basis for a WG4 deliverables until the end of the project, while also advancing the work of WG4’s just transitions review group.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK CARRIED OUT DURING THE STSMS

The fellowship focused on 5 regions in North Macedonia (Bitola and Kichevo), Serbia (Kostolac), Greece (Ptolemaida) and Kosovo (Obilic). These regions are all facing challenges in the movement away from coal, and onto alternative sources of energy. In some of them (Ptolemaida, and to some extent Kichevo) there is an active process of coal decommissioning and changing the economic base, while others (Bitola) are in the very initial phase of transition. In a third category of region (Obilic, Kostolac) future expansion has been stopped, but phase-out plans are unclear (albeit with an emergent national level institutional framework in Serbia). Across the region, academic research on just transitions is almost non-existent, particularly in relation to the new institutional and policy setting.

Throughout the STSM, I worked closely with the ‘Sunrise’ Association based in Skopje, North Macedonia. This organization, otherwise supported by the Green European Foundation, is currently undertaking

numerous projects and initiatives in the just transition domain. While being based in Skopje, I also used the STSM to travel to neighbouring regions (Serbia, Kosovo and Greece).

I commenced the STSM with an extensive literature review (including over 200 documents, from the scientific literature to policy documents and reports, many published in local languages – some of these I sourced directly from local archives). I also travelled to the local sites described above, and informally spoke with local residents there, to get a sense of the issues that are being faced in each region. I formally interviewed 10 experts from across the region, based in government, academia, business, and the third sector.

The outcomes of the STSM were included in several chapters, papers and recordings. One of these is a book chapter that the Sunrise Association is writing, focusing on just transitions in North Macedonia. I have also used insights from the STSM towards ongoing papers (under review) in *Progress and Human Geography* and *Antipode*. I also used the STSM as a basis for with a policy brief that was submitted to Analytica.

What is more, I recorded several videos about the STSM for the Sunrise Association. They now been published on the youtube channel of the Green European Foundation:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPn_lxmj8tk
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rlu74p1i3A>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Mnw8--aO4U>

An interview with me was also published on the pages of the Sunrise association (at <http://www.izgrejsonce.mk/vest-statija/94731/buzharovski-energetskata-demokratija-mozhe-da-ja-nadmine-energetskata-siromashtija-so-pravednost?fbclid=IwAR3SgsSus1VQq2NdHEsA4iD1SYnQmc3Wz0FZeuf3IWAq9Pe2stHkk2KHLK0>), and a second interview is soon to be published in the Faktor magazine.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN RESULTS OBTAINED

The STSM found that one of the region's main ongoing challenges in the decommissioning of lignite-burning plants is the central importance of the coal-based economy for the revenue streams of relevant regions. State-owned coal plants provide a major source of employment across the Western Balkans. They also support various ancillary industries around the extraction, processing, transport and distribution of energy resources, in addition to the development and maintenance of energy infrastructures. Even if some governments have nominally announced a coal-phaseout, the practicalities of this transition on the ground are unclear. There is very little awareness and acceptance, among potentially affected communities, of the major economic, political, and social trade-offs that are required in order to wind down lignite-based infrastructures. What is more, the operation of power plants is tightly connected with various vested interests and the national and regional scale. In part, this is due to predominance of state ownership in the energy production sector, overemployment in state-owned industries that generate electricity, and the historically strong role of energy lobbies in influencing the economic policy of the region.

Non-governmental organisations working in the Western Balkans have been actively attempting to promote alternative sources of income and employment for coal-based economies, and start a public debate on the practicalities of the coal phase-out process. In North Macedonia, the 'Eko Svest' NGO, in particular, has been running a project on just transitions in the Kichevo and Bitola regions, working on the development of new forms of tourism, agriculture and local enterprise as innovative forms of employment to create opportunities for workers in the coal industry. One of their key arguments is that a just transition away from coal does not need to involve the energy sector per se. While renewable energy installations (of which some are starting to be developed in the Kichevo region in particular) typically lead to lower direct levels of employment, the skills and knowledge that are embedded in the coal industry across the region can be utilised for the development of other economic sectors. Many of these activities, and particularly agriculture, were present well before the development of fossil fuel resources.

Organisations active in the West Balkan NGO sector argue that the coal-based regions need an immediate commencement of efforts to promote the long-term planning of fair transition programmes. The process necessitates the active participation of workers, trade unions, local people, small and traditional businesses, civil society organisations and local authorities. Building local trust is key.

FUTURE COLLABORATIONS (if applicable)

I intend to continue working closely with the Sunrise Association as well as other NGOs in the region (Eko Svest) in the development of their just transitions agenda. I am also strongly interested in the trans-national activities of the Bankwatch network in this regard, and their regional approach towards a just transition. During the STSM I also started working closely with the Energy Community Secretariat in Vienna, and I hope to be able to collaborate with them on their work on energy poverty as it relates to coal phase out. My academic and research partners in the region include Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, the National Technical University of Athens, and the Hrvoje Pozar Institute in Zagreb. I hope that the STSM will help me extend these collaborations further.