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# Just Transition in EU External Action: Conceptualising EU Efforts to Promote a Global Low-Carbon Future

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DEPARTMENT OF EU INTERNATIONAL  
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# **Just Transition in EU External Action: Conceptualising EU Efforts to Promote a Global Low-Carbon Future**

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## About the Author

Ronan McLaughlin is a Scottish alumnus from the College of Europe in Bruges, where he obtained an MA in EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies in 2021. He also holds an MA in French and International Relations from the University of St Andrews. His professional experience includes working for the Scottish Government's EU Office in Brussels, as well as Scottish NGOs and research institutes. This paper is based on his Master's thesis at the College of Europe (Mário Soares Promotion, 2020-2021), for which he was awarded the Energy Community award for the best thesis on European Energy Governance.

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## **Abstract**

The decline of the coal industry is one of several trends driven by decarbonisation policies which have the potential to lead to negative social and economic consequences for certain workers, communities, and regions. Here, just transition has become an important concept, broadly denoting policies aimed at protecting those facing socio-economic challenges in the context of the low-carbon transition and seeking to promote their inclusion in transition planning efforts. The European Union (EU) has also begun to develop policy in this domain, including the recently announced Just Transition Mechanism. This evolving EU action has garnered significant academic interest and this paper seeks to contribute to this debate by asking how and why the EU engages externally on this issue, and what version of just transition is advanced when it does so? To do so, the paper first considers the growing importance of just transition and contemporary interpretations of the term, before examining the development of such policies inside the EU and establishing key features of the EU's approach. It then outlines the EU's international engagement on just transition to date, looking in depth at two case studies: the negotiation and signing of the 2018 Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration, and the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine. Ultimately, the paper argues that within its borders the EU leverages just transition as a policy initiative aimed at facilitating adaptation to a low-carbon future by securing public buy-in and supporting those with the potential to be negatively affected by that transition. Furthermore, policies in this area are also designed to be highly concentrated in geographical terms, inclusive of local stakeholders, focus on skills, retraining and economic diversification, and emphasise the importance of forward planning. Elements of this approach are mirrored externally, where the growth of just transition to the centre of international climate policy debates has also included the EU's engagement in bilateral and multilateral initiatives in which just transition is approached in a broad and non-prescriptive way, recognising the value of mutual learning and the sharing of experience and focusing on participatory and inclusive processes.

## Introduction

In March of 2021, Europe reached a key milestone in efforts to phase-out polluting and carbon-intensive coal from its energy systems, with half of the continent's 324 coal-fuelled power stations having closed or announced a retirement date before 2030.<sup>1</sup> This is a trend also mirrored beyond Europe. In the USA, it has now been over 10 years since coal was the primary fuel for electricity generation,<sup>2</sup> while in China, the world's largest coal user, consumption has plateaued over the last several years, remaining below a peak reached in 2013.<sup>3</sup>

Developments such as these are among a number of trends driven by decarbonisation efforts that are leading to concerns about potentially negative social and economic effects on certain regions, workers, and communities.<sup>4</sup> There is growing recognition that increasingly widespread objectives to achieve net-zero carbon economies by the middle of this century will have major implications on jobs, skills, employment prospects and income distribution.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, there has also been a corresponding growth in interest in how the low-carbon transition can be implemented in a fair and politically smooth way<sup>6</sup> and a recognition that neglecting such considerations could lead to a backlash which slows or even reverses this essential transformation.<sup>7</sup> Here, just transition has become an increasingly important and recognised concept.

Although contested,<sup>8</sup> the concept of just transition has grown greatly in use and popularity in recent years and is now promoted by an increasingly wide range of

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<sup>1</sup> Kira Taylor, "Europe halfway towards closing all coal power plants by 2030", *Euractiv*, 23 March 2021.

<sup>2</sup> David Cherney, "Coal's Unstoppable Decline Means Carbon Emissions from Electricity Will Keep Dropping For Years To Come", *Forbes*, 13 January 2021.

<sup>3</sup> "Coal 2020: Analysis and Forecast to 2025", *International Energy Agency*, December 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Ajay Gambhir, Fergus Green & Peter J. G. Pearson, *Towards a just and equitable low-carbon energy transition*, *Grantham Institute Briefing Paper*, No. 26 (London: Imperial College London, 2018), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Béla Galgóczi, "Just transition on the ground: Challenges and opportunities for social dialogue", *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2020): 367.

<sup>6</sup> Fergus Green & Ajay Gambhir, "Transitional assistance policies for just, equitable and smooth low-carbon transitions: who, what and how?", *Climate Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 8 (2020), 902.

<sup>7</sup> Ajay Gambhir, Fergus Green & Peter J. G. Pearson, *op. cit.*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause & Dimitris Stevis, "Introduction: The genealogy and contemporary politics of just transitions", in *Just Transitions: Social Justice in the Shift Towards a Low-Carbon Environment*, edited by Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause & Dimitris Stevis (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 5.

actors.<sup>9</sup> With roots in North American labour movements of the 1970s,<sup>10</sup> it can be said that just transition has today been recognised as an international norm, embodied in the work of the United Nations and other international organisations.<sup>11</sup> While the numerous competing understandings and definitions of just transition will be explored later in this paper, the consideration of the concept advanced by Anabella Rosemberg provides a useful starting point for this analysis:

“The concept of just transition – as a strategy aimed at protecting those whose jobs, incomes and livelihoods are at risk as consequence of climate policies, or more broadly as the world pursues more sustainable pathways – presents the advantage of engaging with those workers and communities most affected, giving them an active role in rethinking their future.”<sup>12</sup>

Just transition can therefore be broadly considered as a range of policies aimed at protecting workers, communities and regions facing socio-economic challenges as a result of the low-carbon transition and seeking to promote their inclusion in transition planning efforts.

In the last few years, the European Union (EU) has become increasingly conscient of these developments, the need to advance the low-carbon transition and to mitigate the social and economic consequences for citizens, regions and industries. Just transition was recently prominently endorsed and institutionalised by the European Commission through its flagship European Green Deal (EGD),<sup>13</sup> and there are a number of signs which indicate a growth in just transition as a policy priority for the EU's external action as well.

Corresponding to the growth of the concept and its move towards the centre of policy debates, academic interest in just transition has also grown from the early 2000s.<sup>14</sup> Given the new salience of the topic in EU policy, there has been increased attention as to how just transition is being operationalised within the EU. However, while much of this attention has been focused on the internal dimensions of such policies, just

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ajay Gambhir, Fergus Green & Peter J. G. Pearson, *op. cit.*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Anabella Rosemberg, *Policy Analysis Brief: Strengthening Just Transition Policies in International Climate Governance* (Muscatine: The Stanley Foundation, 2017), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Claudia Strambo, *Just Transition and the Geopolitics of Decarbonisation in the EU* (Stockholm: Stockholm Environment Institute, 2020), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause & Dimitris Stevis, *op. cit.*, 6.

transition in the EU's external energy, environmental and climate policy is less well-researched. This paper seeks to address this gap, by asking how and why the EU engages externally on this issue, and what version of just transition is advanced when it does so?

In doing so, this paper builds on a wealth of literature and academic study from a range of authors.<sup>15</sup> Building on these works, this paper contributes to academic study in this area by conceptualising just transition within EU policy making, mapping this onto the broader debate on the variations of the concept, and then exploring EU international action in this policy area. This paper has also relied on interviews with policy makers, officials and experts, and a comprehensive analysis of EU policy documents, strategies and legislation related to just transition.

The paper will proceed with an initial overview of the history of just transition and an examination of contemporary interpretations of the term, before considering its growing importance within the EU and the dominant conceptualisation in EU policy making today. A second section will consider the international dimension through examining two case studies: the EU's participation in the negotiation and signing of the 2018 Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration, and the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine. These case studies have been selected as they represent two of the most high-profile examples of EU external action on just transition to date.

Ultimately, it is argued that within its borders the EU leverages just transition as a policy initiative aimed at facilitating adaptation to a low-carbon future by securing public buy-in and supporting those who risk being negatively affected by that transition. Policies in this area are also designed to be highly concentrated in geographical terms, inclusive of local stakeholders, focus on skills, retraining and economic diversification, and emphasise the importance of forward planning. Elements of this approach are mirrored externally, where the growth of just transition to the centre of international climate policy debates has also included the EU's engagement in bilateral and multilateral initiatives in which just transition is approached in a broad and non-prescriptive way, recognising the value of mutual learning and the sharing of experience and focusing on participatory and inclusive processes.

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Dimitris Stevis, Romain Felli, Béla Galgóczi and Anabella Rosemberg.

## Just transition and the European Union

While the history of the concept of just transition stretches back over fifty years,<sup>16</sup> its appearance in global<sup>17</sup> and EU policy debates is more recent.<sup>18</sup> In order to understand just transition in EU policy making, it is necessary to first briefly trace the origins, the development and the contemporary interpretations of the term, before relating this to the iterations of just transition in the internal policy and activity of the European Union today. This will then serve as a basis for the subsequent analysis of the external dimensions of this question.

### *The growth of just transition as a policy response to environmental challenges*

North American labour movements are most often credited with the first development of what would eventually become known as just transition. In particular, Tony Mazzocchi, an American trade unionist, is generally considered to be the father of the idea<sup>19</sup> thanks to his call for the creation of a *Superfund for Workers* to support and provide training for those whose jobs had become obsolete due to environmental regulation.<sup>20</sup> From here, just transition ideas began to spread through organised labour in the USA and around the world.<sup>21</sup> The growing integration of labour and environmental concerns was particularly notable among trade unions in Spain, the UK and Australia throughout the mid-1990s and early 2000s.<sup>22</sup>

Around this period, just transition also began to appear in global-level policy debates, initially still within the sphere of organised labour, including on the agenda of the International Trade Union Confederation,<sup>23</sup> but then more broadly in forums such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

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<sup>16</sup> Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause & Dimitris Stevis, *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Béla Galgóczi, *Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All* (Geneva: International Labour Organisation, 2018), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ioanna Theodosiou & Nikos Mantzaris, *Just Transition: History, Development and Challenges in Greece and Europe* (Athens: The Green Tank, 2020), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause & Dimitris Stevis, *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Béla Galgóczi, *Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies for All*, *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Dimitris Stevis & Romain Felli, "Planetary just transition? How inclusive and how just?", *Earth System Governance*, Vol. 6, (2020), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause & Dimitris Stevis, *op. cit.*, 14.

<sup>23</sup> International Trade Union Confederation. *Just Transition – Where are we now and what's next? A Guide to National Policies and International Climate Governance* (Brussels: ITUC, 2017), 6.



Conference of the Parties (COP) discussions<sup>24</sup> and in reports by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).<sup>25</sup> Over the past ten years, just transition has moved to the heart of global debates on how to address climate change and manage the transition to low-carbon economies and is also increasingly embedded in regional, national and sub-national level governance.<sup>26</sup> Finally, a number of recent events and movements have also brought the issues associated with just transition to the forefront of public consciousness. This is notably true of the *gilets jaunes* protests in France, which highlighted how green policies can be met with public resistance when they fail to be inclusive and are seen as unfair.<sup>27</sup> It is therefore clear that over the last fifty years just transition has grown to become a globally relevant concern driving responses to the climate crisis at all levels of policy making.

### *A contested concept*

Despite this growing acceptance and recognition of just transition, it is important to reiterate that the term remains contested, with numerous different foci and competing definitions. In order to discuss these differing considerations, it is useful to begin with an examination of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all*, which have been described as a "definitive model for just transition",<sup>28</sup> though this is of course contested. Following this, a consideration of a range of perspectives which can broadly be described as critical will then be undertaken, allowing for a spectrum of just transition definitions to be presented onto which the version ascribed to by the EU can then be mapped.

Published in 2015, the ILO Guidelines set out to provide "non-binding practical orientation to Governments and social partners".<sup>29</sup> Setting out six key guidelines, the document highlights the centrality of social consensus and dialogue on the transition

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<sup>24</sup> Béla Galgóczi, *Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies for All*, *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause & Dimitris Stevis, *op. cit.*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Laima Eicke, Silvia Weko & Andreas Goldthau, "Countering the risk of an uneven low-carbon energy transition", *IASS Policy Brief*, Vol. 8 (2019): 8.

<sup>28</sup> Samantha Smith, *Just Transition: A Report for the OECD*, (Brussels: Just Transition Centre, 2017), 3.

<sup>29</sup> International Labour Organisation, *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all* (Geneva: International Labour Organisation, 2015): 3.

pathway,<sup>30</sup> as well as consideration of gender dimensions, the need for coherence across policy areas, the priority of the creation of more decent jobs and the importance of international cooperation.<sup>31</sup> Senior Researcher Béla Galgóczi comments:

“The ILO Guidelines highlight the importance of securing the livelihoods of those who might be negatively affected by the green transition and also stress the need for societies to be inclusive, provide opportunities for decent work for all, reduce inequalities and effectively eliminate poverty.”<sup>32</sup>

The ILO Guidelines therefore outline a vision of just transition which is conceived of as a broad and inclusive process, tailored to local circumstances, which seeks to address associated societal aims such as the elimination of poverty and the provision of more decent jobs.

While the ILO Guidelines provide an important framework that has been endorsed by many, they have also been criticised by numerous authors, with some positing far more radical and transformational visions of just transition. In their 2020 article, Irina Velicu and Stefania Barca advance a criticism of the ILO Guidelines founded on their failure to conceptualise what *just* and *justice* signify.<sup>33</sup> The authors claim the Guidelines offer a “much more restricted version of the sustainable development discourse”,<sup>34</sup> focused only on securing jobs in new low-carbon economies, in which considerations of what *just* in just transition means is limited to workers' inclusion in negotiations on this transition process.<sup>35</sup> They see that this narrow conceptualisation of justice “inevitably reproduces workers as subjects of inequality”.<sup>36</sup> This can be broadly associated to what Dimitris Stevis and Romain Felli term the “social ecological approach” to just transition,<sup>37</sup> in their typology of three varieties of just transition. This approach calls for the “democratization of social and economic relations”<sup>38</sup> and a “reorganization of the

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Béla Galgóczi, *Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies for All*, *op. cit.*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Irina Velicu & Stefania Barca, “The Just Transition and its work of inequality”, *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2020): 266.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>37</sup> Dimitris Stevis & Romain Felli, “Global labour unions and just transition to a green economy”, *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2015): 38.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

relations between state, capital and labour"<sup>39</sup> in order to redress imbalances of power in society and ensure production is redesigned to meet human and planetary needs, rather than those of profit.<sup>40</sup> The contested nature of the just transition concept is therefore clear. Given these various interpretations, it is now pertinent to analyse the growth of just transition in EU policy making and to consider how the version ascribed to by the bloc falls in relation to the diverse visions presented here.

### *Just transition in the European Union*

While just transition is a novel concept in Europe, transitions themselves are not. Among the most notable, and in many cases painful, past transitions to happen in Europe were those related to economic restructuring and deindustrialisation in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>41</sup> Conscient of the challenges of past transitions and of the increasing unprofitability of environmentally damaging industries such as mining around Europe, calls for the establishment of a just transition policy at EU level began to gain traction in the European Parliament around 2015.<sup>42</sup> These calls were led by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from eastern member states in particular, who saw just transition largely from a social and economic point of view, as a way to protect jobs in regions which had few economic opportunities beyond coal.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately this led to the inclusion of just transition projects in the Modernisation Fund,<sup>44</sup> a funding programme supporting ten lower-income member states which was created as part of the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS).<sup>45</sup> This constituted an important milestone as for the first time EU funds were granted for the express purpose of just transition in coal regions.<sup>46</sup>

2017 subsequently saw the establishment of a dedicated just transition policy initiative in the form of the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition, designed to help address the social impact of the low-carbon transition and promote knowledge sharing and the exchange of best practice.<sup>47</sup> In 2019 a dedicated secretariat was established for the

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>41</sup> Sanjeev Kumar, Arianna Americo & Charlotte Billingham, *The New Social Contract: A Just Transition* (Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 2016): 13.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with European Commission Official 1, online, 27 January 2021.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Ioanna Theodosiou & Nikos Mantzaris, *op. cit.*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> "Modernisation Fund", *European Commission* (no date)

<sup>46</sup> Ioanna Theodosiou & Nikos Mantzaris, *op. cit.*, 14.

<sup>47</sup> "Coal regions in transition", *European Commission*, 24 March 2021.

initiative, with responsibilities including the facilitation of regular meetings between the regional representatives, the development of toolkits to assist regional actors in accessing EU support and other resources and the provision of tailored technical assistance in areas such as just transition strategy development, project identification and development support.<sup>48</sup> In responding to requests for assistance submitted by eligible regions, the secretariat also often visits the region concerned to engage with local and community actors, including civil society organisations, in order to include their perspectives in the technical assistance workplan under development.<sup>49</sup> The Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition is therefore based largely on the provision of technical support, resources and the sharing of experience and best practice across Europe. It is also directed at a regional level with a focus on engagement with a range of actors at the local level.

Just transition, and climate and environmental policies at EU-level generally, took a major step forward with the new European Commission and its flagship European Green Deal unveiled in December 2019.<sup>50</sup> The EGD sets out a vision for addressing the climate and environmental crisis, referred to as “this generation's defining task”, and outlines a strategy for achieving a fair and prosperous EU economy with net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.<sup>51</sup> Through the EGD, a Just Transition Mechanism is proposed which seeks to provide support for those regions and sectors most affected by the transition and ensures the move towards low-carbon economies is fair and inclusive.<sup>52</sup> Specifically, the mechanism has three pillars. The first is a Just Transition Fund to be established within the framework of EU cohesion policy to finance the necessary investments to support transition in the most affected regions.<sup>53</sup> The two additional pillars are an InvestEU just transition scheme and a public sector loan facility with the European Investment Bank, designed to support a wider range of investments, including those outside specific just transition territories<sup>54</sup> and to mobilise and facilitate private investment.<sup>55</sup> At present, the Just Transition Mechanism continues to work its

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Senior Adviser to the European Commission, online, 23 February 2021.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> European Commission, “The European Green Deal”, COM/2019/640, 11 December 2019, 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing the Just Transition Fund*, *op. cit.*, 2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with European Commission official 1, *op. cit.*

way through the EU's legislative process, though some elements, including the Just Transition Fund have recently been formally adopted.<sup>56</sup>

To provide further detail on the Just Transition Mechanism, the Fund pillar specifically will now be examined in greater depth. Following inter-institutional negotiations, the final resources dedicated to the Just Transition Fund were revised down to €17.5 billion, with €7.5 billion allocated under the Multiannual Financial Framework and €10 billion under Next Generation EU.<sup>57</sup> The stated aim of the Fund is to support the "people, economies, and environment of territories facing serious socio-economic challenges deriving from the transition process towards the Union's 2030 targets for energy and climate".<sup>58</sup> The Fund is specifically directed at level three territories,<sup>59</sup> the smallest geographical classification used for the framing of EU regional policies,<sup>60</sup> and to access the funds member states are required to prepare just transition plans in coordination with local authorities in the territory concerned.<sup>61</sup> Activities which the Fund can be used to support are also outlined, including investments in small and medium-sized enterprises, development of clean energy technologies, training and upskilling of workers and the inclusion of job seekers.<sup>62</sup> Finally, there is also a mechanism linking access to the Fund to member states' overall climate targets, whereby funding can be restricted by 50% to any member state which has not committed to the EU-wide target of climate-neutrality by 2050.<sup>63</sup> Hence, the Just Transition Fund is designed to provide financing for a range of activities to compensate specific territories for disruptive socio-economic consequences of climate and environmental policies. It also clearly seeks to ensure the inclusion of local actors by requiring member-state authorities to cooperate with them on the development of just transition plans and seeks to incentivise member states to adopt ambitious climate policies, restricting their access to funding if they do not.

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<sup>56</sup> European Union, "REGULATION (EU) 2021/1056 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund", *Official Journal of the European Union*, L231/1, 24 June 2021, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Agnieszka Widuto and Pernilla Jourde, *Just Transition Fund* (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021), 2.

<sup>58</sup> European Union, *REGULATION (EU) 2021/1056 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund*, *op. cit.*, 6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>60</sup> "NUTS - Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics, Background", *Eurostat*, (no date).

<sup>61</sup> European Union, *REGULATION (EU) 2021/1056 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund*, *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

In recent years, just transition policies have become increasingly prominent and institutionalised at EU level, though the European Green Deal and the Just Transition Mechanism clearly mark an important turning point, demonstrating an unprecedented level of ambition and commitment.

Having examined the specific policy instruments, the parameters and objectives of the vision of just transition being advanced by the EU will now be considered.

### *Conceptualising just transition in internal EU policies*

Having outlined the key elements of EU just transition policies to date, it is possible to identify four key elements in the EU's approach, which will now be explored further here.

A first key theme in the EU's approach can be identified as the instrumentalization of just transition as a mechanism to facilitate climate and environmental policies and to minimise popular resistance to the upcoming low-carbon transition. This stems from a recognition that while the overall impact of the transition to climate neutrality will be positive, with the EGD described as a "growth strategy",<sup>64</sup> there will be specific citizens, regions and industries for whom the process will be challenging and have potentially negative socio-economic impacts,<sup>65</sup> and as such it is necessary to develop compensatory policies in order to secure the support of these specific constituents.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, there is a clear sense that while carbon-intensive industries such as coal mining are becoming increasingly unprofitable and are in inevitable decline as a result of market forces, policies at EU level like the ETS are hastening this decline and the consequent socio-economic impacts.<sup>67</sup> It is therefore incumbent upon the EU to develop solutions to the challenges its policy has helped to create.<sup>68</sup> Related to this, just transition can be considered in the context of the broader ideals of European integration, and in particular in relation to European solidarity.<sup>69</sup> Given the benefits of the low-carbon transition to Europe at a macro-level, negative local-level impacts can be considered in terms of a sacrifice for the broader collective good.<sup>70</sup> In a spirit of solidarity there is therefore a sense of obligation to support these regions for whom the

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<sup>64</sup> European Commission, *The European Green Deal*, *op. cit.*, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with European Commission official 2, online, 18 February 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with European Commission official 1, *op. cit.*

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Senior Adviser to the European Commission, *op. cit.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Interview with European Commission official 1, *op. cit.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

transition will be particularly challenging.<sup>71</sup> Finally, it has also been noted that many of the regions potentially eligible for just transition support express a high degree of Euroscepticism and criticism of the impact of previous EU policies.<sup>72</sup> This presents an additional incentive to ensure appropriate consideration of the socio-economic impact of a flagship EU policy such as the European Green Deal and to develop mechanisms to alleviate those impacts and potential associated public resistance. Just transition in the EU is therefore related to notions of fairness and solidarity with parts of the continent likely to lose out as a result of an inevitable social and economic evolution, but it is also related to a sober political calculation regarding the need to ensure popular acquiescence in contexts with high levels of Euro-scepticism.

A second common element in the EU's just transition policy concerns the focus on concentrated and territorially targeted support and the prioritisation of engagement with local stakeholders. This is reflected in the European Green Deal which states the transition "must put people first" and ensure "active public participation",<sup>73</sup> and the regulation for the establishment for the Just Transition Fund which concentrates support at the level of small territorial units.<sup>74</sup> The importance of public engagement is practically exemplified through the community engagement work of the secretariat for the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition,<sup>75</sup> and in the obligation under the Just Transition Fund for transition plans to be developed in coordination with local authorities.<sup>76</sup> Seeking to explain this approach, Claudia Strambo posits that this distinct territorial focus and the prioritisation of engagement with local actors provides a mechanism to overcome political obstacles to advancing decarbonisation, in that it allows to some extent for the bypassing of the national level at which some member states remain resistant to change.<sup>77</sup> Though this approach has also been justified as a way to maintain the distinctiveness of just transition policies and ensure that resources allocated through them are used for their specific intended purpose.<sup>78</sup> It can therefore be said that among the potential mechanisms to operationalise just transition, the

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Interview with European Commission official 3, online, 08 February 2021.

<sup>73</sup> European Commission, *The European Green Deal*, *op. cit.*, 2.

<sup>74</sup> European Union, *REGULATION (EU) 2021/1056 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund*, *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Senior Adviser to the European Commission, *op. cit.*

<sup>76</sup> European Union, *REGULATION (EU) 2021/1056 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund*, *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Claudia Strambo, *op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with European Commission official 1, *op. cit.*

European Commission has opted for a targeted territorial approach,<sup>79</sup> in which engagement with local stakeholders is at its heart.

An emphasis on retraining, skills and education, as well as investments to promote economic diversification can be considered a third common theme in the EU's approach. This is evident in the EGD which calls for "re-skilling programmes" and "jobs in new economic sectors",<sup>80</sup> and in the regulation establishing the Just Transition Fund, which advocates for "the economic diversification of territories impacted by the transition"<sup>81</sup> and "upskilling and reskilling of workers and jobseekers".<sup>82</sup> This can be seen to respond to a particularly acute skills challenge, in which the long-term dominance of a single carbon-intensive industry in a region alongside other trends such as digitalisation has the potential to make a lack of relevant skills a significant barrier to accessing new socio-economic opportunities in the post-transition world.<sup>83</sup> Just transition policies are therefore intended to provide citizens and workers with the skills and training needed to adapt and integrate into the new low-carbon economy.<sup>84</sup> Correspondingly, the EU's approach to just transition also seeks to encourage economic dynamism in the regions concerned, and the creation of new jobs in those localities to replace those lost through the phase-out of carbon intensive industries.<sup>85</sup> The importance placed on the continuing availability of sources of employment in the regions supported through just transition policies is particularly important to emphasise, as a way to avoid the kinds of regional depopulation which resulted from previously poorly managed transitions in Europe.<sup>86</sup> These priorities are evidenced in the regulation for the Just Transition Fund, in which the initiatives which can be supported under the scheme include "productive investments in small and medium-sized enterprises, including microenterprises and start-ups, leading to economic diversification", and "upskilling and reskilling of workers and jobseekers".<sup>87</sup> Despite the ambition to promote economic diversification and encourage skills development to meet the needs of post-transition economies, it can nonetheless be said that EU just transition policies

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with European Commission official 2, *op. cit.*

<sup>80</sup> European Commission, *The European Green Deal*, *op. cit.*, 16.

<sup>81</sup> European Union, *REGULATION (EU) 2021/1056 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund*, *op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with European Commission official 4, online, 12 February 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Sebastiano Sabato and Boris Fronteddu, *op. cit.*, 17.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with European Commission official 1, *op. cit.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> European Union, *REGULATION (EU) 2021/1056 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund*, *op. cit.*, 9.



remain limited in their scope, in that there are limited references to broader issues of social inclusion such as inequality.<sup>88</sup> While gender equality and the importance of recognising the circumstances of vulnerable groups is mentioned briefly in the regulation for the Just Transition Fund,<sup>89</sup> issues of equality and social inclusion are left largely unaddressed in the EGD and documents related to the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition, though this may become a growing feature of EU just transition policy in the future.<sup>90</sup>

A final element in the EU approach to just transition policy can be identified as a recognition of the importance of transition planning, and of the potential negative implications of failing to plan. It can be said that there has been a recognition amongst both EU policy makers,<sup>91</sup> and local and regional actors<sup>92</sup> that the transition will not be inclusive by default and of the need to plan early for the future given that transitions can take decades to implement.<sup>93</sup> In practical terms, this focus on detailed transition planning is evidenced in the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition, given the role of the secretariat in supporting transition plan development and in the importance placed on the sharing of transition plans and models of economic diversification through the initiative.<sup>94</sup> It is also central in the regulation for the Just Transition Fund, with member states required to develop just transition plans with local authorities in order to access funding.<sup>95</sup>

To sum up, within the EU just transition can therefore be considered a policy initiative designed to facilitate the transition to a low-carbon future by securing public buy-in and supporting those with the potential to be negatively affected by that transition, particularly given the EU's role as an institutional leader on climate and environmental policies and high levels of Euroscepticism in many of the regions concerned. Policies in this area are also designed to be highly concentrated in geographical terms, to be inclusive through engagement with local stakeholders and ensure their ownership of the process. This regional focus also facilitates the transition process, allowing a

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<sup>88</sup> Sebastiano Sabato and Boris Fronteddu, *op. cit.*, 17.

<sup>89</sup> European Union, *REGULATION (EU) 2021/1056 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund*, *op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with European Commission official 1, *op. cit.*

<sup>91</sup> Interview with European Commission official 5, online, 12 February 2021.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with European Commission official 2, *op. cit.*

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Senior Policy Adviser at a Brussels-based think tank, *op. cit.*

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Senior Adviser to the European Commission, *op. cit.*

<sup>95</sup> European Union, *REGULATION (EU) 2021/1056 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund*, *op. cit.*, 10.

bypassing of national-level authorities to some extent, important in cases where member states remain resistant to fully embrace the low-carbon transition. EU just transition policies also focus on skills, retraining and economic diversification, seeking to ensure the ongoing economic dynamism of the regions concerned, but do not go beyond this, failing to consider broader questions of equality and social justice. A final element concerns an emphasis on transition planning and a recognition of the need to map out the road to transition in concrete terms. Broadly, just transition policies advanced by the EU are therefore designed to facilitate an inclusive and managed transition to an economically dynamic low-carbon future in specific regions currently dependent on carbon-intensive industries which require phasing out to support global climate and environmental objectives.

### **Just transition in EU external action: Bi- and multilateral case studies**

To explore just transition in the EU's external action, this section examines two case studies, reflecting bilateral and multilateral contexts respectively. A final section will then draw conclusions from the cases examined and posit some common themes regarding the EU's external action on just transition.

#### *EU bilateral engagement on just transition: The Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine*

Supporting neighbouring states in their decarbonisation efforts, including through a just transition, is a key priority of the EU's external environmental policy, emphasised in the EGD,<sup>96</sup> and in the Council Conclusions on climate and energy diplomacy of 25 January 2021.<sup>97</sup> This was also laid out more specifically in the European Commission's *Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans* which outlines EU support for the post-COVID-19 economic recovery in the region, including through a "green and digital transition".<sup>98</sup>

The Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine was launched in December 2020, with the intention of supporting the countries concerned

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<sup>96</sup> European Commission, *The European Green Deal*, *op. cit.*, 20.

<sup>97</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council conclusions on Climate and Energy Diplomacy – Delivering on the external dimensions of the European Green Deal*, Brussels, 25 January 2021, 11.

<sup>98</sup> European Commission, "An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans", COM/2020/641, Brussels, 6 October 2020, 1.

in undertaking a just transition away from coal and towards carbon-neutrality.<sup>99</sup> Support through the programme is directed towards regions in six countries and is managed by the European Commission in collaboration with international partners including the European Investment Bank, the College of Europe in Natolin and the World Bank,<sup>100</sup> whose participation is considered particularly important in that it brings a non-European perspective to the programme.<sup>101</sup> While open to any region with significant coal use and production in the six countries concerned,<sup>102</sup> the initiative is currently engaged with 17 regional partners.<sup>103</sup> The programme mirrors the intra-EU Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition and seeks to build on the opportunities of bringing together regional stakeholders from the EU, the Western Balkans and Ukraine, to share experiences and best practice, to find synergies in their activities and to facilitate cooperation between them.<sup>104</sup> A secretariat was established in February 2021 to support the implementation of the initiative<sup>105</sup> and the roll out of the five elements that make up the programme.<sup>106</sup> The first element is the delivery of training and learning resources, undertaken principally by the College of Europe in Natolin, in the form of courses on transition planning, social policy and the provision of relevant reports, data and academic literature.<sup>107</sup> Other elements include the organisation of regular platform meetings between the participants, and a twinning component between peers in the EU and the Western Balkans and Ukraine, and also across the non-EU regions.<sup>108</sup> Two final elements are the provision of technical assistance and advisory services, and financial assistance, provided by the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.<sup>109</sup>

In terms of objectives, building on and making the most of the experience of others is a key aim.<sup>110</sup> It is hoped that the programme will act as a forum for the exchange of

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<sup>99</sup> European Commission, *Initiative for coal regions in transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine*, *op. cit.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Interview with European Commission official 3, *op. cit.*

<sup>102</sup> European Commission, *Initiative for coal regions in transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine*, *op. cit.*

<sup>103</sup> "Commission launches the secretariat of a new initiative for coal regions in transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine", *European Commission*, 15 February 2021.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with a member of a collaborating partner of the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine, online, 9 April 2021.

<sup>105</sup> European Commission, *Commission launches the secretariat of a new initiative*, *op. cit.*

<sup>106</sup> Interview with a member of a collaborating partner of the Initiative, *op. cit.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

experience and knowledge between and among EU and non-EU regions, allowing others to use the lessons of previous transitions.<sup>111</sup> There is also an ambition to support the regions concerned in accessing financing, thereby ensuring regional authorities have the means necessary to implement transition plans fully.<sup>112</sup> Finally, ensuring the transition process is inclusive and locally led is also a key objective, evidenced by the broad range of stakeholders which many elements of the initiative are open to, including local community representatives, NGOs, businesses, and regional authorities.<sup>113</sup> This is in recognition of the broader economic, social and cultural significance that industries such as coal mining can have, both for those directly involved and others in the region.<sup>114</sup> It can also help to ensure the just transition process is understood and accepted and provides opportunities for a broad range of input into that process.<sup>115</sup> Ultimately, the ambition is to facilitate transition away from coal in the Western Balkans and Ukraine by providing assistance to and thereby expedite progress towards decarbonisation.<sup>116</sup>

The Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine is therefore an important example of EU international engagement on just transition. While at a very early stage, there is an expectation that this programme may continue to grow or that similar initiatives may develop, also beyond the EU's neighbourhood.<sup>117</sup>

#### *EU multilateral engagement on just transition: The Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration*

While discussion in the UNFCCC previously dealt only marginally with social and economic concerns, this began to change from 2008, with references made to employment issues in the 2009 COP15 negotiating text.<sup>118</sup> The Paris Agreement negotiated at COP21 in 2015 and the Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration signed at COP24 in 2018, can now be seen as part of a new phase of global climate negotiations in which broader social issues, including the need for just transition, are seen as essential to multilateral debate.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> European Commission, *Commission launches the secretariat of a new initiative*, *op. cit.*

<sup>112</sup> Interview with a member of a collaborating partner of the Initiative, *op. cit.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Anabella Rosemberg, *op. cit.*, 6.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

Taking place in December 2018 in the Polish city of Katowice, COP24 welcomed over 20,000 international delegates principally to discuss the Paris Agreement “operating manual” and achieve consensus on issues such as mechanisms for reporting of emissions and contributions to climate finance programmes.<sup>120</sup> However, the event was also billed by many as a ‘Just Transition COP’, particularly given its symbolic location in the heart of one of the biggest coal mining regions in Europe.<sup>121</sup> This was a particular priority for the Polish Presidency organising the summit, who hoped to progress the international debate by building on the inclusion of just transition in the Paris Agreement, to share Poland’s experience of its ongoing transition and to focus the debate on the human impacts of decarbonisation.<sup>122</sup>

The Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration, signed by over 50 parties on the opening day of the conference, was an important achievement in this respect, raising the profile of just transition and placing it at the heart of global climate governance. As the COP Presidency, Poland began to negotiate and garner support for the Declaration months prior to the official conference, adapting the text and their approach following discussions with international partners.<sup>123</sup> The EU was said to be an engaged partner from an early stage in these negotiations, particularly given that it was around this time that just transition was gaining recognition as an important policy priority and initiatives at EU level were beginning to be implemented.<sup>124</sup> The Presidency engaged in talks with a wide range of EU partners, including representatives of the Commission, the Council and other member states, taking notes of their comments and making adjustments to the text as part of the normal negotiating process.<sup>125</sup> Overall, the EU was considered to have been an important and constructive partner throughout, sharing the Presidency’s view on the importance of including the social consequences of climate change in the COP forum.<sup>126</sup>

In terms of content, the Presidency was driven by the priorities of raising the global profile of just transition and of gaining widespread approval for the Declaration, and as such stuck to a broad conception of the term rather than dictating an

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<sup>120</sup> Simon Evans & Jocelyn Timperley, “COP24: Key outcomes agreed at the UN climate talks in Katowice”, *Carbon Brief*, 16 December 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause & Dimitris Stevis, *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with a Senior Official of the COP24 Polish Presidency, online, 12 April 2021.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

uncompromising definition.<sup>127</sup> There was also, however, a will to extend the idea beyond rich northern states and beyond the coal sector, to highlight the applicability of just transition to a broad range of contexts and to promote the integration of just transition into the fabric of the UNFCCC process.<sup>128</sup> As such the document itself recognises the opportunities of new low-carbon economies to provide decent jobs and affirms a recognition of the importance of just transition for the achievement of the Paris Agreement objectives.<sup>129</sup> The Declaration also outlines an appreciation of the differential impacts of the transition and the particular vulnerabilities of developing countries and specific economic sectors, cities and regions.<sup>130</sup> Finally, there is also a recognition of the importance of participation and social dialogue, of securing public buy-in<sup>131</sup> and a call for increased sharing of experience across international organisations and among all stakeholders concerned.<sup>132</sup>

It is therefore clear that the Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration represents an important milestone in the growth of just transition as an issue of global relevance and a key example of EU multilateral engagement on just transition. While taking a broad approach to what just transition means, the Declaration nonetheless includes a number of important markers of the term, including a recognition of the differential impact of the low-carbon transition, a focus on inclusion, the provision of decent jobs and the value of sharing of experience. The EU played an important role in the negotiation of this text, and the Declaration was signed by the European Commission and numerous EU member states.

It is now pertinent to consider this Declaration alongside the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine, to identify any commonalities and possible conclusions regarding the EU's external action on just transition.

### *Comparing EU bilateral and multilateral engagement on just transition*

While the Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration and the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine are clearly very different, with one being a broad declaratory statement, and the other a targeted policy instrument,

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> COP24, *Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration*, *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

they represent two of the most high-profile examples of EU international action on just transition.

Regarding their approaches to the definition of just transition, it can be said that generally both cases take a broad and non-prescriptive approach. In the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine this is evidently deliberate in that a key element of the programme focuses on supporting the regions concerned to develop their own transition roadmaps,<sup>133</sup> thereby remaining largely unspecific as to what that transition should entail. Regarding the Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration, it has been shown how the Polish Presidency took a deliberately broad approach to just transition in an effort to secure the widest possible support for the Declaration.<sup>134</sup> While in the bilateral case this approach can be seen as part of an effort which prioritises local ownership of the transition process and support for the development of local transition plans, in the multilateral case this reflects an effort to secure the broadest support possible.

While the importance of mutual learning and sharing of experience features in both cases, there is an evident greater focus on this in the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine. In this programme, there is a prioritisation of the exchange of experience and knowledge, with three of the five elements of the initiative focused on this.<sup>135</sup> In contrast, this element of just transition policy is referred to in only one subsection of the Solidarity and Silesia Just Transition Declaration, which states that the parties will “[h]ighlight the importance of further work on the just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs, including: Sharing experiences from Parties, relevant international organizations, observer organizations, as well as other stakeholders”.<sup>136</sup> While both mention the importance of sharing knowledge and experience, this is referred to minimally in the Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration, while it is a fundamental element of the second case.

Finally, regarding the target constituents of each case and their approach to inclusion and participation in the just transition process, it can be said that while there are important differences in the scope of each, both underline the necessity of inclusive

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<sup>133</sup> European Commission, *Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine*, *op. cit.*

<sup>134</sup> Interview with a Senior official of the COP24 Polish Presidency, *op. cit.*

<sup>135</sup> Interview with member of a collaborating partner of the Initiative, *op. cit.*

<sup>136</sup> COP24, *Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration*, *op. cit.*, 3.

and representative processes. Clearly the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine is highly targeted in its approach, given its focus on supporting regional actors in a small group of countries with their transition away from coal specifically.<sup>137</sup> In contrast, the Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration is far broader in scope, recognising the particular difficulties faced by developing countries,<sup>138</sup> highlighting the challenges of transition for regions, cities and economic sectors and referring to the transition to low-greenhouse gas emissions and climate resilient economies generally, rather than in reference to a particular industry<sup>139</sup>. Despite these differences in scope, both cases emphasise the importance of inclusion and participation in relation to their respective constituencies. In the Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration parties note “the importance of a participatory and representative process of social dialogue involving all social partners”,<sup>140</sup> while the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine demonstrates its commitment in this area through its openness to the participation of a broad range of stakeholders.<sup>141</sup> As such, there is an evident common focus on inclusion and broad participation despite a different focus.

Comparing these two cases has therefore allowed for the identification of key common features of EU just transition policy beyond its borders. These can be identified as a broad and non-prescriptive approach to just transition, a recognition of the value of mutual learning and the sharing of experience and a focus on participatory and inclusive processes. Although it remains important to recognise variations in strength of commitment to these principles across the two cases and some key outstanding differences, such as the target constituents of each case.

### **Conclusion: The future of just transition in international affairs and EU external action**

This paper has sought to examine the questions of how and why the EU engages externally on the issue of just transition, and what version of the concept is advanced when it does so. It has highlighted that just transition is now an internationally recognised although still contested policy issue, relevant at all levels of governance, from global to local. While still at an early stage, EU internal just transition policies can

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<sup>137</sup> European Commission, *Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine*, *op. cit.*

<sup>138</sup> COP24, *Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration*, *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Interview with member of a collaborating partner of the Initiative, *op. cit.*



be seen as an effort to facilitate EU-led decarbonisation policies and minimise popular resistance, while key elements of the approach can be identified as a focus on territorially targeted support, engagement with local stakeholders, an emphasis on retraining, skills and economic diversification and the need for transition forward-planning. While this approach can be seen as largely grounded in principles such as solidarity, inclusion and participation, there are also evident sober political considerations such as an ambition to counter Euroscepticism and bypass member states who remain resistant to decarbonisation reforms. Furthermore, it is important to note the absence of broader questions related to social inclusion, with limited reference to issues such as equality in just transition policy documents. Externally, an examination of the Solidarity and Just Transition Silesia Declaration and the Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine highlighted a non-prescriptive approach to the definition of just transition, an emphasis on mutual learning and sharing of best practice and, in common with features of internal policies, a recognition of the importance of inclusion and participation of local constituents.

Given the early stage of many EU internal and external just transition policies, a fruitful possible future area of research is the analysis of the effectiveness of these efforts. Furthermore, beyond the EU, the extent to which other key global players, such as the United States and China also promote just transition issues in international fora and their interaction with the EU in this regard, will be another interesting area to consider.

EU international engagement on just transition can be expected to grow further in the coming years. This was a view expressed by numerous European Commission officials and frontline practitioners interviewed for this paper, who point to the need to advance transition in other parts of the world and in other carbon-intensive industries beyond coal,<sup>142</sup> and highlight the potential for existing just transition policies to be expanded further.<sup>143</sup> This is also an ambition which has been expressed officially at EU level, particularly in the Council Conclusions on Climate and Energy Diplomacy published in January 2021.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, just transition can also be expected to grow in importance given its value as an objective in itself, as a way to protect individuals and communities facing social and economic hardship resulting from decarbonisation, but also as an effective way to counter fears or narratives which

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<sup>142</sup> Interview with European Commission official 3, *op. cit.*

<sup>143</sup> Interview with member of a collaborating partner of the Initiative, *op. cit.*

<sup>144</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Climate and Energy Diplomacy*, *op. cit.*, 7.

threaten to frustrate efforts to address the climate crisis.<sup>145</sup> As the need to take action becomes ever more urgent, it can therefore be expected that the EU and others will seek to promote just transition to a greater extent.

While just transition is critical inside Europe, with hundreds of thousands of coal miners and strongholds of carbon-intensive industry, the scale of the transition required in global industrial manufacturing and coal production heartlands, largely located in Asia, is on another level. Given climate neutrality targets announced by China and others in the region,<sup>146</sup> it is clear that a coal phase-out and the transformation of carbon-intensive industry will become a reality in these areas in coming decades. Ensuring it does not lead to political turmoil and widespread socio-economic devastation will require forward planning and just transition policies. Here, the EU has a critical future role to play as a globally recognised climate and environmental actor and champion of multilateralism. By ensuring just transition is integrated into its external action, the Union can both work to accelerate decarbonisation and can act to avoid the potentially devastating consequences of poorly managed transitions which could threaten Europe's economic prosperity and social stability. Collaboration on just transition can therefore be expected to grow as an important feature of global environmental, climate and energy governance and represents a key area in which effective international engagement will be critical for the EU in coming decades.

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<sup>145</sup> Interview with European Commission official 3, *op. cit.*

<sup>146</sup> Climate Home News, "Which countries have a net zero carbon goal?", *op. cit.*

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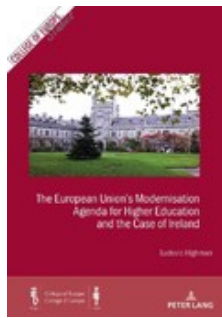
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