



JUST GREEN TRANSITION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS OVERCOMING TRANSITIONS FATIGUE

“Just Green Transition” (JGT) is the term used today to describe the global crusade to transit from unsustainable economic models towards a carbon neutral economy. This process entails far-reaching technological, institutional, and behavioural changes (transition) that should contribute to reducing the impacts of the environmental crisis (green) and shall take place in a socially-fair way (just).

In the Western Balkans (WB), however, the JGT is, so far, mostly used as a buzzword without fully generating the necessary awareness of the scale and transformative nature it implies. This is reflected

in the absence of a comprehensive approach to coordinating climate and environmental action. Instead, there is a patchwork of policy initiatives tackling specific sectors. Furthermore, as the WB countries commit to the JGT, a key concern is how to land the narrative of a ‘transition’ in a region that has been subject to several transitions through history with questionable levels of success.

This policy brief aims to increase clarity of what are the practical implications of JGT for the WB region and for its domestic policy arena, and offer recommendations for how to achieve better policy implementation and increased societal support.

What is Just Green Transition?

Policy background

The just transition concept is rooted in the struggles of the American unions during the 1970s and 1980s to protect jobs during processes of industrial reconversion. The notion of a 'just transition' was formalised and mainstreamed into the climate agenda in the 1990s, with similar aims, namely to protect workers whose jobs were at risk due to climate policies. Today, the notion of JGT expanded and refers to fair sustainability transitions where 'no person and no place are left behind'.

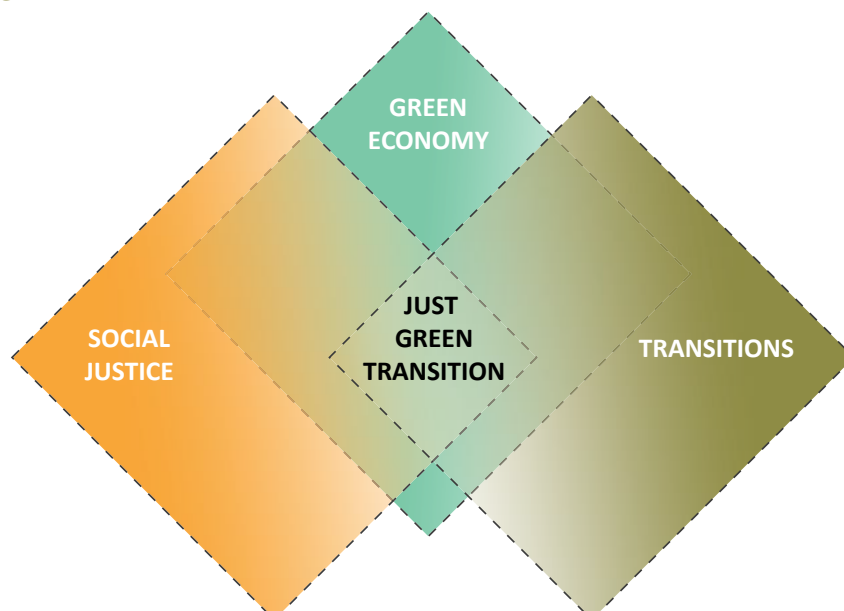
The notion of JGT gained political momentum after the approval of the Paris Agreement and today it is an integral part of the European Green Deal (EGD), the union's new growth strategy. The EGD aims to transform the union into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy while reaching climate neutrality, reducing waste and pollution, moving to a circular and resource-efficient economy, and stopping the loss of biodiversity. In addition, the strategy establishes implementation mechanisms for ensuring a "just transition". The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) represents an extension of the EGD.

Beyond policy

The JGT combines three concepts, each with its own independent theoretical and practical traditions; 1) **transitions**, 2) **the green economy**, and 3) **social justice**.

The JGT, is a type of socio-technical transition, which requires a shift from one sociotechnical regime (a carbon economy) to another (a sustainable economy). In practice, this means that the process of industrial transformation and implementation of technological innovations, such as renewable energies, electrification of vehicles, or precision agriculture, need to go hand-in-hand with changes in the institutional structures, and the overall organisation of society and economic activity. This is why, despite the access to knowledge and new technologies, they often take time to be adopted, as economic activity is embedded in social norms, practices, and the 'way-to-do-things' in different countries and regions. Conversely, place-specific conditions shape the way innovations are materialised.

Green socio-technical transitions are extremely complex and difficult to engineer, and often require painful trade-offs between economic, societal, and environmental objectives that may lead to a range of outcomes with winners and losers. An approach to justice is, therefore, the key to ensuring an inclusive and fair process, and to design effective measures to mitigate the negative consequences of a transition.



Transitions

Transition denotes a dynamic process of change from one state to another. Transitions theory has been extensively applied across disciplines such as economics, sociology, political science, environmental, and innovation studies.

'Socio-technical transitions' refer to systemic change across the complex interrelatedness of social, economic, institutional, and technological elements in the organisation of a system.

Green economy

Green economy is one that requires low levels of carbon. The term emerged from the realisation that human activity needs to be restricted to a 'safe zone', not to cross the 'planetary boundaries' or limits to which the earth systems are able to self-regulate and recover.

The transition to a green economy involves changes to all sectors, from energy and transport to construction, industry, agriculture, forestry, and all links to the production and consumption chains. This includes the application of new technologies, increased resource efficiency, as well as the move from a linear to a circular economy.

Social justice

A cry for 'just transitions' popularised in the 1970s and 1980s by trade unions in the US and Canada concerned about the consequences of environmental protection policies on jobs, and reflected the development of a justice-based political discourse in the 19th century, often linked to the distribution of income and wealth.

In the context of green transitions, the commonly referred forms of justice, are: i) 'distributive justice' pointing to where the impacts (costs and benefits) are located or distributed, ii) 'recognition justice' referring to which societal groups are recognised or neglected in policy processes iii) 'Procedural justice': entailing the formal and informal forms of involvement in decision-making processes.

Additionally, spatial justice popularised in the 1970s linking social-justice to space/territory. It focuses both on redistributive issues thus the distribution of burdens and benefits across different geographical areas, and decision-making processes.

Western Balkans in between transitions

The JGT, both as a concept and as a policy framework, is being introduced in the Balkans via the GAWB. Formalised in 2020 with the Sofia Declaration, the GAWB is the basis for a new growth strategy for the region, embedded in the EU Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans. This entails the adoption of EU directives and transposition of regulation across policy areas and on a wide range of issues, from climate law, meeting energy efficiency goals,

air and water quality standards, to the waste management framework, limiting pollution, increasing circularity, etc. This first step needs to be followed by implementation, leading to 'real', tangible change in all industrial sectors. This, we argue, represents an effort of colossal dimensions, matching or even surpassing the scale of transformations experienced in the region, first, in the post-communist transition, and second, as conditionality to EU accession.

The terminology used here resonates with past and ongoing transformations. The term 'transition', in fact, was exhaustively employed in the post-communist era in the early 1990's, specifically to label Central and Eastern European countries as 'transition countries'. A 'purposive transition' was set in motion characterised by a deliberate goal of transformation with an explicit set of societal expectations and drawing heavily on foreign aid and political steering. This transition was signalling epochal change and at the same time involving great degree of uncertainty. With time WB countries embarked on varying hybrid political-economic models, regardless of the path designated by the Western agents centred on privatisation, liberalisation, and democratisation.

While still transiting towards fully functional liberal democratic systems, in the early 2000's, WB countries were offered a trajectory for integration into the European Union, again consisting of a prescribed list of structural and political reforms. However, despite the financial and technical support provided, the integration process soon became a moving target. This is partly due to changing conditions, moving away from its original course towards an increased emphasis on tackling democratic shortfalls in the region, in addition to the rapidly changing

rules within the EU common market. These changes have had an overwhelming effect on the WB society at large and made the practical implementation an, arguably, impossible task.

All in all, the promises of a 'transition to' a liberal democracy, of a free economy, or a spot within the EU, have all generated high expectations in the past few decades, just for many to be disillusioned with the poor performance of the economic and social policies set in motion and the uncertain outlook. The path towards EU accession has been obstructed by the (arguably) unrealistic expectations, in combination with the incapability of the WB countries to set themselves afoot on a workable development path, as well as difficult governance of multilateralism at the interior of the EU, creating obstacles for further expansions. This situation, we argue, has produced a 'transitions fatigue' or a general sense of scepticism, or even mistrust, towards policies prescribed by external entities, as well as the ability of the political class in the WB to design comprehensive and place-sensitive policies.

In this context, unless serious efforts are made to transform the countries from within, the JGT, channelled via the GAWB, risks ending in the bucket of unaccomplished transitions,



Overcoming the transition fatigue

The future development path of the WBs, including the JGT, is in our own hands. A key impediment, we argue, is the prevailing expectation that foreign aid and eventually EU membership will solve structural problems in the region, from unemployment to public management. Neither will. These ungrounded expectations may be preventing us from building a sense of ownership of our own future and taking responsibility for laying the path forward.

Carrying on the JGT, therefore, will depend on the ability of WB countries to, first, truly comprehend our socio-economic contexts, and second, to design our own roadmap based on a realistic, bottom-up, and self-defined action points decoupling economic progress from environmental degradation. As follows, we propose a set of recommendations which should be addressed and coordinated at multiple levels (macro-regional, national and local).

Ensuring that no person and no place is left behind in the transition

- **Recognise (identify)** all potentially affected groups and map all types of impacts individual interventions may have to them, particularly the most vulnerable groups.
- **Ensure procedural justice, by creating opportunities for participation of all the identified stakeholders and affected groups.** Enable all stakeholders to bring to the discussion table their views, interests and priorities and enable a genuine process of dialogue aiming at building consensus. This will allow democratising decision-making processes, overcome challenges emerging from necessary trade-offs between different objectives, to build trust among stakeholders, and to create a sense of ownership of the green agenda. To achieve this, make use of existing networks and platforms for policy discussion and coordination, such as TG WeB, RCC, Nalas, WB Info Hub Platform, etc.
- **Make sure that costs/burdens and benefits are fairly distributed, among all societal groups, especially the most vulnerable.** This could be enabled, first, by recognizing all potentially affected vulnerable groups and further mapping impacts of individual interventions to different societal groups and territories, to properly design measures to mitigate the most affected.

In addition to ensure, spatial justice we should:

- **Design place-based strategies that are sensible to the specific spatial and territorial implications of transition measures.** In the spirit of a 'just transition' ensure that policies consider the local needs and interests.
- **Develop tailor-made action plans targeting developments with the highest impact potential.** Capitalise on successful industrial developments, community initiatives, or public management practices.
- **Explore business - models that give communities the option of participation or co-ownership of new business ventures to receive a share of the benefits.** For example, in wind and solar energy projects - allowing citizens to buy shares.

Build capacities and allocate resources for the technical transition

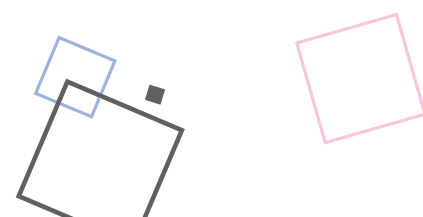
- **Build capacities within the public administration to gain better understanding of the practical and technical implication of policy measures towards transition.** Besides knowledge, empower the technical staff by giving them the tools and funding necessary for implementation.

- **Prioritise training and reskilling the workforce to adequately equip professionals with the knowledge and tools to adapt to the changing labour market needs.** Monitor closely the global trends and development of the technical frontier in critical sectors and ensure education programmes quickly adapt to emerging needs. Work at all levels, from formal education curricula, higher education, as well as professional re-education programmes (providing the opportunities for life-long-learning).
- **Create a common understanding of key concepts, targets, and the scope of interventions among all stakeholders.** Build consensus based on jointly created knowledge, sensible to Western Balkans specific context and aspirations.
- **Decrease the communication gap between key players** from different sectors by reinforcing cooperation and engagement by establishing genuine participatory processes on the path towards implementation of the green agenda.
- **Foster innovation processes at all levels.** This entails supporting research and innovation efforts related to the transitions, as well as institutional innovations within public administrations to enable private initiatives to develop.

Managing expectations with better communication

- **Foster transparency and inclusiveness in communicating green transition policies and agenda.** This entails providing clear, reliable, and honest information regarding the objectives, processes, and expected outcomes of these policies while addressing concerns proactively and openly discussing with all relevant stakeholders.
- **Generate clear understanding of what the practical implication of JGT entails for different government tiers and policy sectors.** Highlight the challenges and opportunities it poses for different sectors and territories offering fact-based and reliable information based on research and up to date studies.
- **Develop communication tools** for effective communication by the administrative staff, to help navigate through misleading information about the green transition.
- **Keep focus on the bigger picture** to be able to navigate around the complex landscape of socio-technical transformations. This means to be able to zoom-in and out from partial or immediate milestones (e.g., share of renewable energy targets), to the overall objectives (e.g., battling climate change, and fair transitions). This will help making better decisions where objectives are in conflict with each other.
- **Recognize the inter - connectedness between various technological and industrial regimes,** and to make informed and sensible decisions considering the, often painful, trade-offs that need to be made during these transformations.
- **Work incrementally by supporting ongoing promising developments** (even if embryonic) and endogenous potentials (low hanging fruits) and build from there onto more complex problems. Furthermore, identify the opportunities that can spin-off from ongoing developments. A thorough mapping of promising initiatives, local strengths and forward-looking actors is an important first step.

Adopting a systems perspective

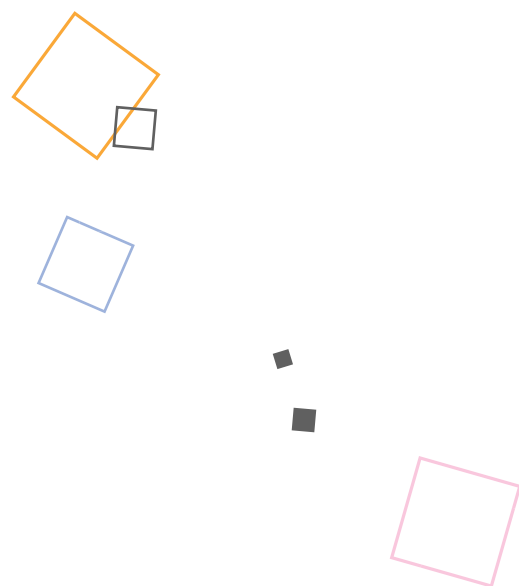




ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief was developed by GreenFORCE, a Horizon Europe project which aims at fostering excellence in the “Western Balkans’ green transition” and scientific research capacities of Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development (Albania), Center for Economic Analysis (North Macedonia), and University of Belgrade, Faculty of Geography (Serbia). These organisations in twinship with Nordregio - Nordic Institute for Regional Development and Planning - (Sweden) and Politecnico di Torino (Italy) are working closely to produce territorial knowledge through exploratory research and institutional learning.

The policy brief and recommendations build on the Report on “Western Balkans Just Green Transition Conceptualisation”, available in the GreenFORCE project website (<https://greenforcetwinning.net>) in addition to contributions of researchers from the GreenFORCE consortium partnership.



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Photos:

Photos from GreenFORCE project archive

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