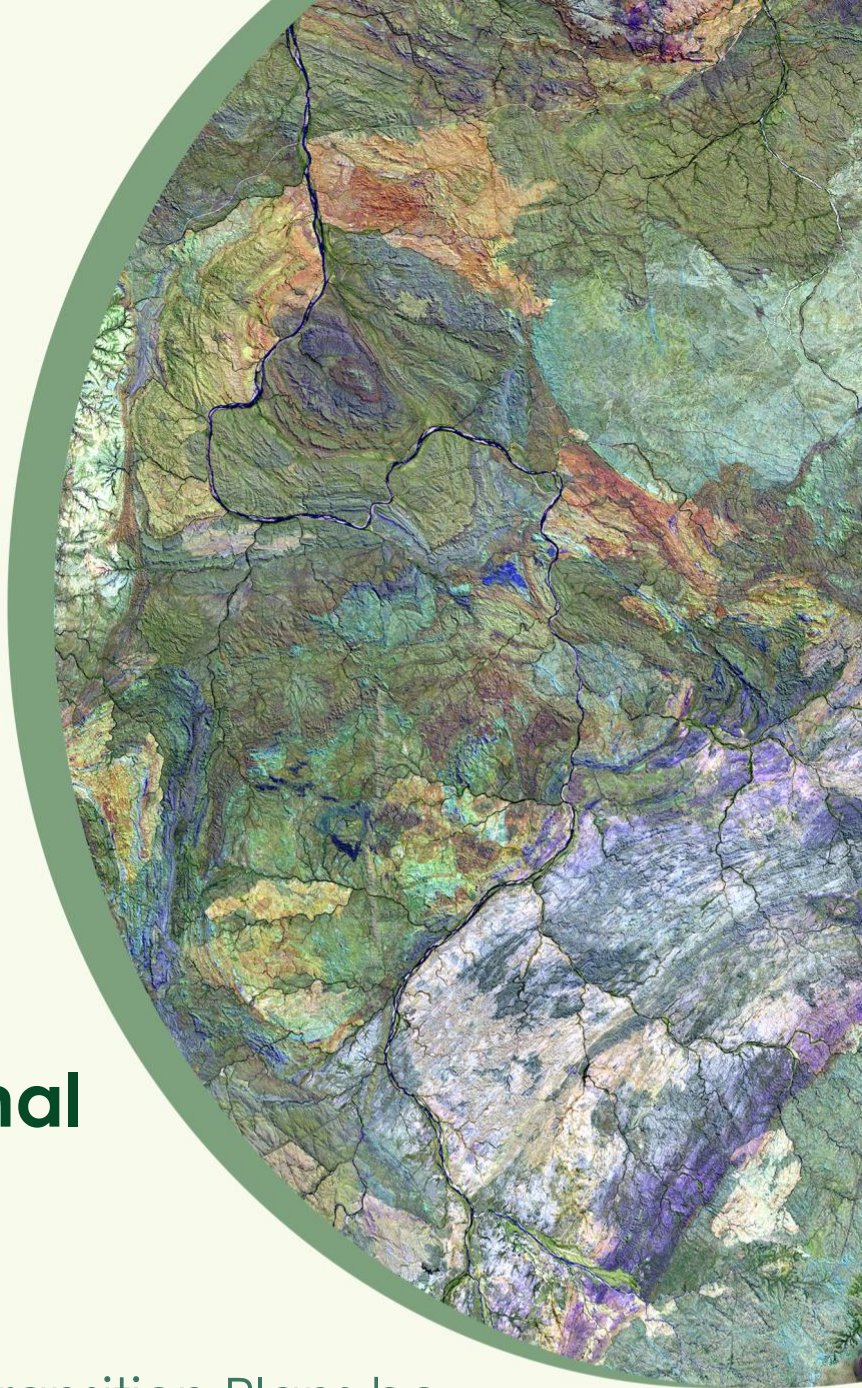




Bridging Organizations and
marginalized communities for Local
Sustainability Transitions in EuRope



7th BOLSTER regional policy dialogue

How can Territorial Just Transition Plans be
truly inclusive towards marginalised
communities?



2 October 2024 – 10:00 - 12:30 CEST



Online



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How can Territorial Just Transition Plans be truly inclusive towards marginalised communities?

On October 2nd, the [BOLSTER](#) project (Bridging Organizations and marginalised communities for Local Sustainability Transitions in Europe) held its seventh regional policy dialogue, as part of overall ten regional dialogues organised by ECAS within the project framework. The dialogues aim to facilitate cross-regional policy learning on just and green transition processes.

The event focused on how the Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTP) can truly be inclusive towards marginalised communities, with a focus on the Stara Zagora region in Bulgaria.

Prof. Christina Nikolova, from the [University of National and World Economy \(Bulgaria\)](#), opened the dialogue by giving an overview of the TJTP and BOLSTER findings in Stara Zagora, a region significantly impacted by the transition, with the highest concentration of coal sector workers. After the environmental assessment report in 2022, the TJTP for Stara Zagora was approved in 2023, while the first calls for projects opened in 2024. The JT funding support for Stara Zagora focuses on three main pillars: (i) sustainable energy solutions industry, (ii) social and employment support, and (iii) diversifying the local economy.

BOLSTER findings suggest that marginalised groups feel the TJTPs may not adequately address their needs, citing insufficient dialogue and trust with regional authorities, limited economic opportunities, and ongoing environmental concerns. Their top priorities include employment and reskilling, green territorial development, active citizen involvement, access to health and education services, improvements in transportation and communication infrastructure, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Moreover, research shows that local stakeholders prioritise the development of financial and human capital and infrastructure, as well as targeted financial support for vulnerable groups.

Alexandra Lulache, from [MKBT \(Romania\)](#) presented the main BOLSTER findings in the Prahova region, the hotspot of the Romanian oil and gas industry. She outlined that Prahova has a weak and underdeveloped civic sector, marked by low trust in the local public authority, which, in their view, kept the process of just transition plans “behind closed doors.” Alexandra outlined a two-fold problem that reduced participation in Prahova's JT process: (i) non-inclusive policy planning that ignored marginalised groups and (ii) a one-size-fits-all approach to funding distribution. BOLSTER findings revealed that transition can be more just and responsive to marginalised groups by involving diverse actors in the planning stages, adopting a holistic approach beyond the employment narrative, and having a place-based approach to funding.

Next, **Dr. Artur Ochojski** from the [University of Economics in Katowice \(Poland\)](#) presented preliminary research on the Polish case of Upper Silesia, which represents the largest TJTP in Europe. He focused on the inclusivity of the TJTP and the mobilisation of communities to ensure no one is left behind. The findings indicate that projects primarily target operational activities but must promote further initiatives to ensure a sustainable transition. Key values emphasised by these projects include social integration, ecological considerations, and heritage preservation. However, with funding applications frequently submitted by well-established organisations, questions remain about how effectively the principle of leaving no one behind is being realised in practice.

Lastly, **Remina Aleksieva** from the [Center for the Study of Democracy \(CSD\) \(Bulgaria\)](#) wrapped up the presentations by presenting the findings from the [Democratising Just Sustainability Transitions \(DUST\) project](#), which aims to develop new participatory instruments in sustainable transition efforts to improve citizen participation and trust. It particularly focuses on least-engaged communities and their involvement in the JT process. In Stara Zagora, doubt in public authorities hinders participation due to perceived failures in addressing economic challenges. Trust can be improved through active policymaker engagement for retirees and women, while youth see NGOs as key stakeholders. CSD is currently piloting the [Stakeholder Engagement and Participation \(STEP\) Index](#), a tool designed to evaluate citizen participation in JT policies, helping authorities report on TJTP and enabling NGOs to monitor participation effectively, with adaptations based on local needs.

After a comprehensive overview of the TJTP and marginalised community involvement in Stara Zagora, the dialogue shifted into a panel discussion.

The introductory roundtable with panellists began with **Ivaylo Stoyanov** and **Monica Stoyanova**, representatives from the **Managing Authority of Programme Development of Regions** within the **Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works**. They provided updates on the adoption of the TJTP in December 2023, the launch of two calls, and preparations for a third grant procedure set to be announced by the end of the year.

Next, **Zornitsa Roussinova**, President of the [Economic and Social Council \(Bulgaria\)](#)—a consultative body comprising national employers, unions, and civil society organisations—elaborated on the institution's extensive analytical work on green transition, climate change, and the energy sector.

Prof. Darina Zaimova, from [Trakia University Institute for Sustainable Transition and Development \(Bulgaria\)](#), located in the coal mining region of Stara Zagora, introduced the University's activities, initiatives, and actions regarding the green transition.

Milena Ilieva and **Stanimira Pashova**, from [World Without Borders \(Bulgaria\)](#), introduced their work in supporting marginalised groups in the Stara Zagora region, with a particular focus on the Roma community. Their initiatives encompass social integration, access to education and healthcare, and advocacy for the inclusion of these communities in the JT process.

The panel discussion, guided by four Slido questions, highlighted the challenges faced in including marginalised groups in JT planning and implementation. It addressed the roles of governments, civil society, and the EU in promoting their inclusion in the process and evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of current JT project calls.

- Marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities and low-income households, face systematic exclusion from JT processes due to a lack of awareness and representation. To achieve an equitable JT, meaningful engagement and adequate resource allocation are essential.
- To improve marginalised groups' access to JT funding, governments should actively involve marginalised communities in decision-making, conduct tailored consultations, and simplify the funding application process. Collaborating with local organisations can strengthen trust and broaden outreach.
- While current JT project calls promote economic diversification and workforce reskilling, they suffer from bureaucratic complexity, hindering access for smaller enterprises and marginalised groups. This lack of explicit inclusion mechanisms may exacerbate social inequalities.
- Civil society can foster inclusion by promoting collaboration among NGOs and the public, advocating for marginalised communities, and providing training on green economy skills. Empowering individuals through capacity-building initiatives ensures these communities benefit from the transition.
- The EU can improve accessibility to JT funding by allocating dedicated funds for marginalised groups, simplifying grant procedures, and establishing training programmes for local actors. Increasing the visibility of EU country offices in transitioning regions can also enhance direct engagement and support local initiatives.

In conclusion, the seventh regional policy dialogue of the BOLSTER project highlighted the urgent need for inclusive TJTP that addresses the specific needs of marginalised communities. Through insightful presentations and discussions, stakeholders identified key challenges and opportunities for enhancing participation and resource allocation, highlighting the roles of governments, civil society, and the EU in fostering meaningful engagement. The dialogue reinforced the commitment to developing equitable transition processes, ensuring no one is left behind as regions adapt to sustainable futures.

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