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The role of Youth in the Just Transition: The case of Western Macedonia

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Introduction

The importance of including youth in the political processes, decisions and institutions that affect their lives and future is a necessity, which has also been recognized by the UN. Young people constitute a major human resource for development and have a key role in social change, economic growth and technological progress¹.

With the Just Transition underway in Europe and Greece, and the Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTTPs) in various stages of preparation, evaluation and approval, an important issue arises: that of the role and participation of youth. This is an issue that has been raised both centrally by the European Commission and locally in the Member States.

Specifically, young people aged 15-29 represent the generation that will be called upon to implement the Just Transition planning that is still underway in certain European countries or already being completed in others, and, more importantly, to live in the former lignite regions, which will be shaped by the decisions made today. Therefore, youth should have an active and institutionalized role in all Just Transition phases, from planning to implementation and monitoring.

The experience to date in both Europe and Greece with regard to the preparation of the TJTTPs has highlighted a significant lack of youth participation in the Just Transition. In the majority of Member States, as is the case in Greece, youth are absent from the public debate and planning of the transition. As a direct consequence, young people in lignite areas have no say in their future and in decisions that will significantly affect their lives. They are not aware of the planning to date, a fact which not only jeopardizes its implementation, but also the success of the transition itself.

This report focuses on the role of youth in the Just Transition in the area of Western Macedonia, the largest lignite region in Greece. It presents the latest available demographic data on the region and the characteristics of youth in Western Macedonia, as well as current youth and Just Transition policies in Europe and Greece, along with the funding available to these policies in the current programming period. Furthermore, the role (or lack thereof) of youth in the transition governance mechanism in Greece and Europe is discussed. Finally, this report puts forward policy recommendations for a better and more effective inclusion of young people in the Just Transition of the lignite regions.

¹ United Nations Society and Decision Making Factsheets, "Youth Participation Factsheet", <https://bit.ly/3PHrTe9>

Region of Western Macedonia - Demographic Data

The following key figures on Western Macedonia are presented so as to demonstrate the magnitude of the challenge that this Region -and especially its youth- faces to shift its economic model towards a sustainable direction in a socially just manner. In particular, indices such as population, employment and education are used to compose the past and present picture of the region, so as to determine the starting point of the transition and, subsequently, to monitor the progress of the transition process. To further understand the challenge, a comparison is made between Western Macedonia and the other 95 EU27 coal regions where lignite or coal (or both) is mined or burned.

Geography-Population

Western Macedonia is located in the north-west of Greece; it is the only landlocked Region of the country, bordering Albania to the west and North Macedonia to the north. Spread over 9451 km², it is one of the smallest Regions in Greece, occupying only 7.16% of its total area². It consists of four Regional Units -Grevena, Kastoria, Kozani and Florina- and 13 municipalities, spread across urban and rural areas³.

In terms of population, Western Macedonia is Greece's third smallest Region, after the Ionian Islands and the North Aegean; its largest and most populous city is Kozani, with a population of 137,201, followed by Kastoria, Florina and Grevena, with 46,048, 45,162 and 26,645 inhabitants, respectively⁴. According to Eurostat data, there were 262,052 people living in this Region in 2021, as opposed to 290,700 in 1991; it is thus the least populated non-island or offshore region in the EU⁵. These figures point to a decline of a nearly 10% rate since the 1990s. This decline has been attributed to both the economic crisis of 2008 and the reduction in lignite production during the 2010s, as these conditions drove part of the population to migrate. A smaller downward trend with an average decline of 7% was observed during the same period in the other EU coal regions (Figure 1). However, it should be noted that the decline of the general population of Western Macedonia has accelerated especially in the last decade, while in the same period the general population in the coal regions of the EU remains almost unchanged.

² Directorate of Development Planning of the Region of Western Macedonia (2021), "Regional Development Program of Western Macedonia 2021-2025", <https://bit.ly/3sVMRw2>

³ OECD (2020), "OECD Territorial Reviews: Regional Policy for Greece Post-2020: Regional Profiles", <https://bit.ly/3wLiqLD>

⁴ Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) (2022), "2021 Population-Housing Census Results/ Permanent Population - Provisional Data, <https://bit.ly/3cq2qXN>

⁵ Region of Western Macedonia (2021), "Draft Program of the Region of Western Macedonia 2021-2027 submitted to the EU", <https://bit.ly/3z67j18>

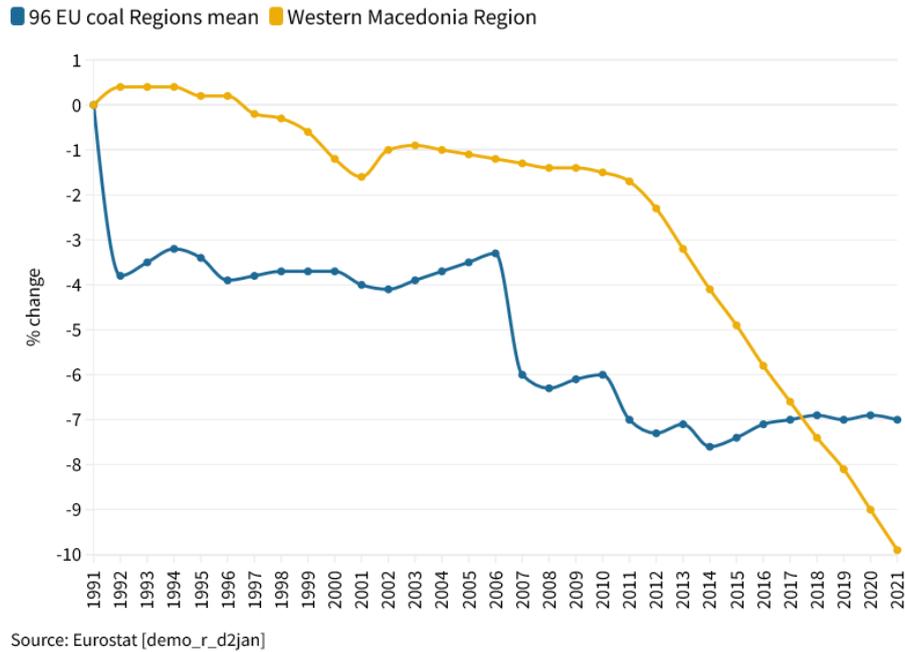


Figure 1: Percentage change in the general population of the Region of Western Macedonia and the average general population of the 96 EU coal Regions, 1991-2021

According to Eurostat, in 2021, young people aged 15 to 29 years in the EU's coal regions accounted for 16.2% of the total population, while in Greece they accounted for 15.6%. In Western Macedonia, numbering just 39,911 people, they made up 15.2% of the region's population. Compared with 1991, when the youth numbered 62,531 people, it is observed that the shrinking of the youth population in the last 30 years exceeds 36.2%. This too is a trend noticed in all EU coal regions, but to a smaller extent than in Western Macedonia, since the respective reduction rate at an EU level is 34.8% (Graph 2). It is also observed that after 2013 the rate of decline of the youth population in Western Macedonia exceeded the average decline of the 96 EU coal regions.

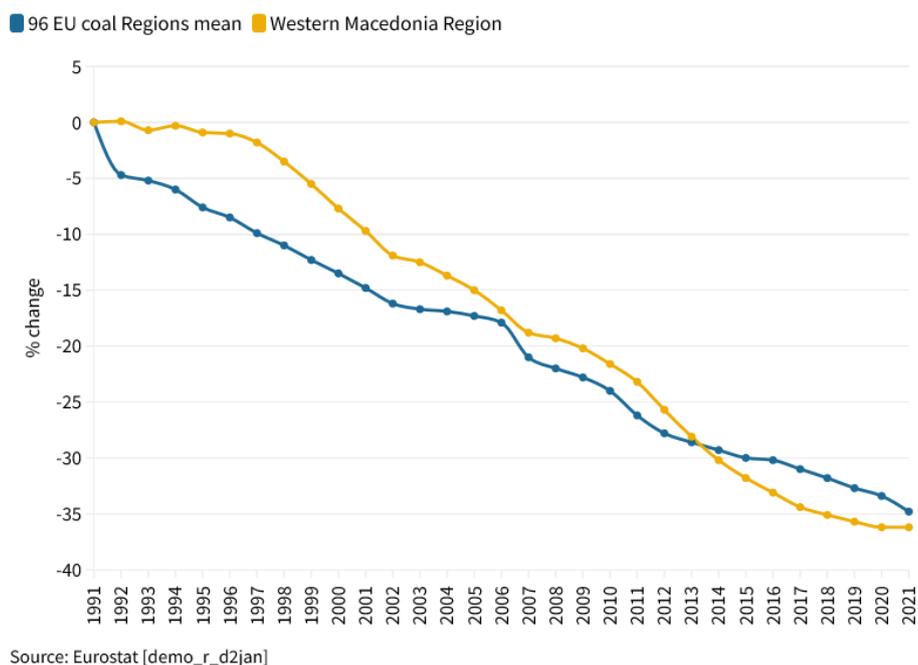


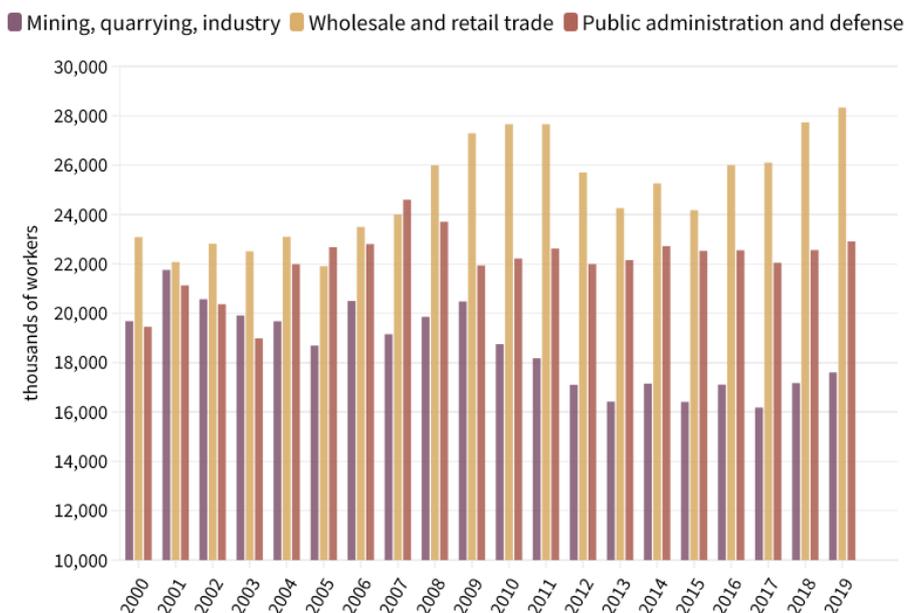
Figure 2: Percentage change of youth (15-29 years old) population of the Region of Western Macedonia and mean youth (15-29) population of the 96 EU coal Regions, 1991-2021

Employment

In the Region of Western Macedonia, the labor force is unevenly distributed to a variety of sectors, such as agriculture, construction, mining, the public sector, services, trade, etc. According to the Hellenic Statistical Authority’s (ELSTAT) data, over the past 20 years, the primary employment sectors in Western Macedonia -among the ten identified- have been the following three:

- “Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; transport and storage; accommodation and food service activities”, with an average of 24,958 employees over the period 2000-2019.
- “Public administration and defense; mandatory social security; education; human health and social welfare activities”, with an average of 22,097 employees over the period 2000-2019.
- “Mining; quarrying; industry; electricity, gas, steam, air conditioning and water supply; sewage treatment; waste management and remediation activities”, with an average of 18,600 employees over the period 2000-2019⁶.

Of these three dominant economic activities, only the first two saw an increase in employment after 2000, while the third, which is related to lignite activity, saw a decrease, especially from 2010 onwards (Figure 3).



Source: ELSTAT [A0703_SEL54_TS_AN_00_2000_00_2019_01_P_BI]

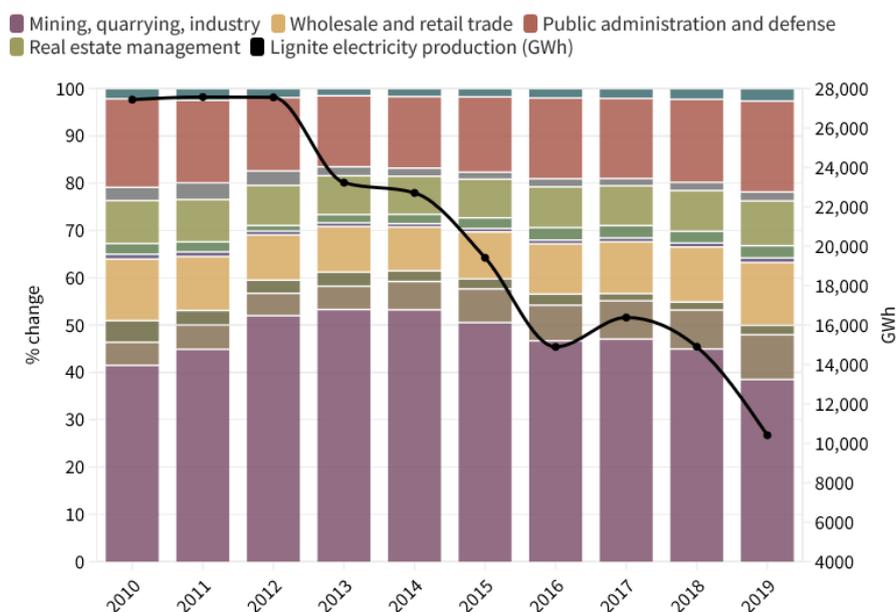
Figure 3: Workforce distribution to the three primary employment sectors in the Region of Western Macedonia, 2000- 2019

⁶ Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) (2019), "Employment by geographical area, region and industry (Provisional data) [A0703_SEL54_TS_AN_00_2000_00_2019_01_P_BI], <https://bit.ly/3NzCar1>

The aforementioned decline in the number of employees in the mining-quarrying-energy sector has been largely attributed to the economic crisis of 2008; however, it was also significantly affected by the downward trend in lignite-based electricity generation, in combination with the structure of the production system in Western Macedonia. The latter had -and still has- the features of a ‘monoculture’, as illustrated by the data on the Region’s Gross Value Added (GVA) showing the largest part of the GVA from 2010 onwards coming from the mining-quarrying-energy sectors. This fact also highlights the Region’s disproportionate dependence on fossil fuel mining and electricity production activities⁶⁵.

In particular, throughout the 2010s, this category (mining-quarrying-industry) held the largest share of the Region’s GVA (Figure 4), while, in the middle of the decade, in 2014 and 2015, it held more than 53%. From 2015 onwards, began a downward trend -albeit small- and in 2019 it recorded its lowest share in that decade (38%), while still remaining in first place.

The course of lignite extraction during the respective period is also downward. Over the seventeen years of the period 2004-2020, an 83% decline was noted. The available data on the course of lignite-based electricity generation show a further 45% decline in 2020, as compared to 2019, while the downward trend continued throughout 2021. Despite the fossil gas price crisis in the second half of 2021 and the rise in the share of lignite in other lignite-producing EU-27 countries, in Greece, lignite-based electricity generation decreased by 6.7% compared to 2020. A similar trend was observed in 2022; in fact, in April 2022, monthly lignite electricity production (176 GWh) reached an all-time low, covering only 4.8% of demand, while in the first eight months of 2022, lignite production increased cumulatively by only 3.7% compared to the same period of 2021⁷.



Source: ELSTAT [A0703_SEL45_TS_AN_00_2000_00_2019_01_P_BI], IPTO

Figure 4: Gross Value Added of economic sectors in the Region of Western Macedonia and lignite-based electricity production, 2010-2019

⁷ Green Tank, Trends in Electricity Production (2020, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3x2jHsY>

Therefore, the lignite phase-out has had an evident and pronounced impact on the Region of Western Macedonia, where, for decades, about 90% of the country's lignite activity took place and the “monoculture” was unquestionable.

Moreover, this Region has traditionally had very high unemployment rates, consistently exceeding the EU average, among both the general population and young people aged 15 to 29 (Figure 5). In addition, traditionally, unemployment among the latter has been higher than that of the general population in both Western Macedonia and the other coal regions of the EU.

More specifically, looking at the past 20 years, unemployment rates in Western Macedonia’s general population hit their lowest levels in 2007 at 12.3%, while they reached an all-time high of 31.7% in 2013. However, over the same time-period, the unemployment rate average of the 96 EU coal regions peaked in 2004 at 11.8% and reached its lowest point, at 5.6%, in 2019. Despite the downward trend observed throughout the 2010s, the region of Western Macedonia continued to perform poorly. For instance, in 2021, the unemployment rate of the general population (19.8%) was noticeably lower than in 2013; however, it was the highest in Greece and the second highest among the EU's coal regions, after Andalusia. The latter had the highest unemployment rates among the 96 Regions in 2020 and 2021, a position held by Western Macedonia up to 2019.

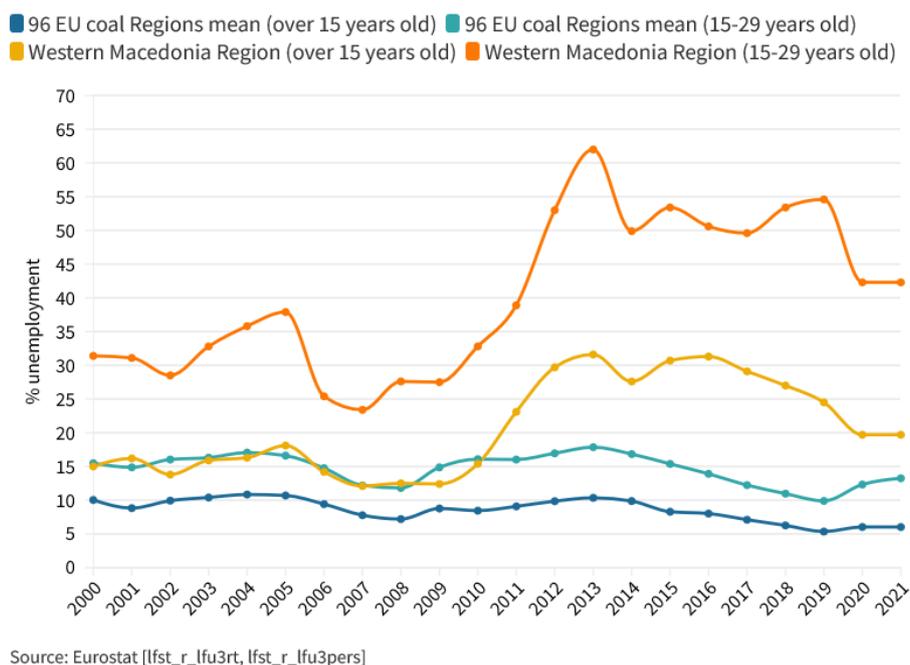


Figure 5: Unemployment rates in the general population and in young people aged 15 to 29 in the Region of Western Macedonia and mean unemployment rates in the 96 EU Regions, 2000-2021

In particular, with regard to the 15-29 age group, the unemployment level in Western Macedonia has been consistently very high over the period 2000-2021. In 2013, the percentage of youth in Western Macedonia reached an all-time high at 62% -double the rate of the whole Region (31.6%) and more than triple the average rate of the 96 EU regions for the same age group (17.9%). Despite the downward trend, which is also in line with that of the Region’s general population, in 2021, youth unemployment rates remained at very high levels (42%), the

highest among the 96 EU regions (13,3% mean). With almost one in two young people being unemployed in Western Macedonia, the latter traditionally maintains its negative lead in this age group, with Andalusia following in second place.

Furthermore, a study by the Foundation for Economic and Industrial Research (IOBE) estimates that, if no counterbalancing measures are implemented, upon completion of the lignite phase-out process in Greece's three lignite regions (Arcadia, Kozani, Florina) in 2029, the latter will have lost 23% of local annual GDP, 13% of local jobs (13,500 jobs) and 24% of local household income from wages, as compared to 2019⁸. Nevertheless, as stated in the approved Territorial Just Transition Plan of Western Macedonia⁹, it is expected that one year after the completion of the 2021-2027 programming period, i.e., in 2030, the Just Transition Program in Western Macedonia will have created and supported -directly, indirectly and consequentially- approximately 10,150 jobs¹⁰.

Education

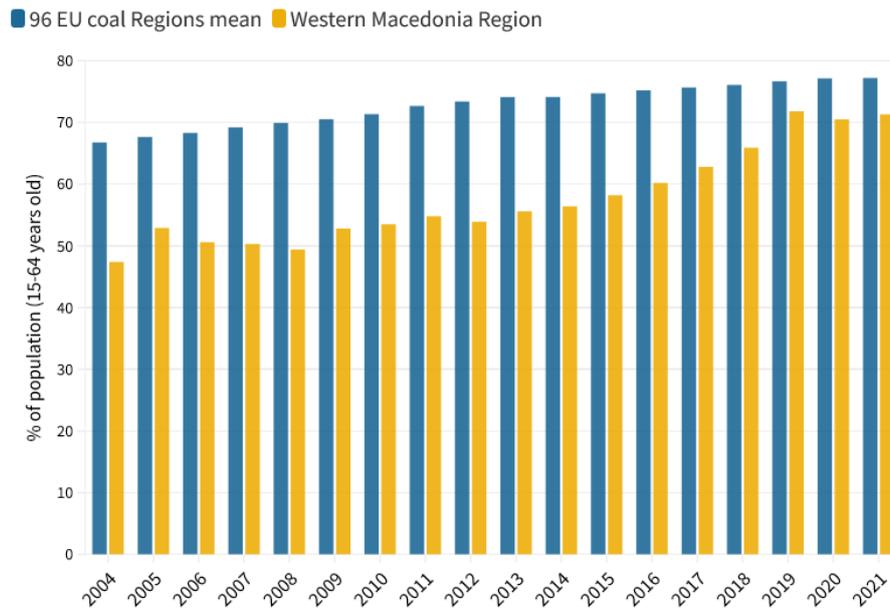
In the field of education of the general population, too, Western Macedonia lags behind the EU coal Regions' average. According to the available Eurostat data, from 2004 to 2021, the percentage of the population aged 15-64 with a high school diploma or higher¹¹ in Western Macedonia has been lower than the average of the other EU coal Regions (Graph 6).

⁸ SDAM, August 2020, Phasing out lignite in electricity production: Socio-economic impacts and compensatory actions, <https://bit.ly/3NXjGRh>

⁹ This refers to a document that each EU Member State - beneficiary of the Just Transition Fund must submit for each of the Regions in transition within its territory, in order to disburse the Fund's resources for that region. For additional details, see the relevant section on the [Just Transition Mechanism](#).

¹⁰ Territorial Just Transition Plan for Western Macedonia, European Commission Decision C(2022)3943, <https://bit.ly/3uKV4UP>

¹¹ The National Qualification Framework has 8 levels of education, corresponding to the European and international standards of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) framework. Level 3 refers to the acquisition of a Vocational Training School (SEK) Specialty Certificate or Vocational Training Institute (IEK) Certificate, while level 8 corresponds to the acquisition of a doctoral degree. Intermediate levels correspond to high school diplomas, vocational schools, undergraduate and postgraduate programs. For additional details, see the "HQF Levels" and "Type Specifications" of the National Agency for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance", <https://bit.ly/3ImJmFN>

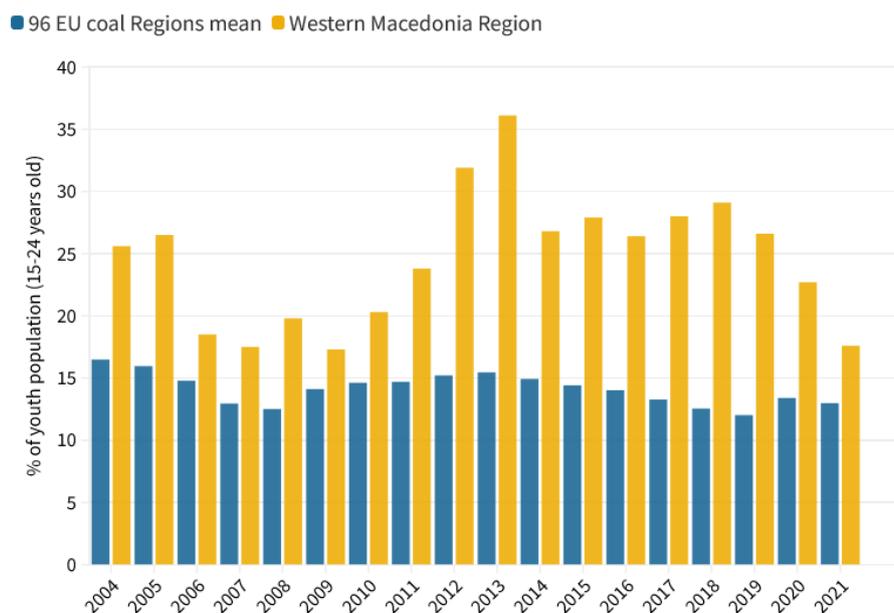


Source: Eurostat [edat_lfs_9917]

Figure 6: Percentage of the population aged 15-64 with an 'ISCED 3 to 8' education level in the Region of Western Macedonia and average of the 96 EU coal Regions, 2004-2021

However, the trend for the education level of the general population is upwards in Western Macedonia; especially from 2012 onwards, a steady increase is noted. Thus, while Western Macedonia lagged behind the EU coal Regions' average by approximately 20 percentage points (47.4% vs 66.8%, respectively) in 2004, in 2021 this difference dropped to 6 percentage points (Western Macedonia: 71% vs. EU coal Regions' average: 77.2%).

Furthermore, Western Macedonia holds an unfavorable leading position internationally with regard to the percentage of individuals aged 15 to 24, who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs); as these young people are not taking part in the labor market or any educational process, they experience a form of social exclusion to some extent. Figure 7 shows the percentage of NEETs in Western Macedonia and the corresponding average of the 96 EU regions for the period 2004-2021. An all-time high of 36.1% (more than double the EU coal Regions' average) was recorded in 2013: more than 1/3 of young people aged 15-24 in the Region were socially excluded, as they had no job or access to education -be it formal or informal- or training. From 2014 onwards, this percentage has decreased; nonetheless, in 2021, 17% of youth still belonged to this subset, with the corresponding average rate in the other coal regions being approximately 13%.



Source: Eurostat [edat_lfse_38]

Figure 7: Percentage of NEETs in the Region of Western Macedonia and their average in the 96 EU coal Regions, 2004-2021

Youth Drain

With employment, education and exclusion conditions being as unfavorable as described above, it is not surprising that there has been a decline in the region’s youth population. The issue of youth drain from Western Macedonia, or the so-called brain drain, is of particular concern to the local community. This was reflected in a survey conducted in the region with the participation of Green Tank¹², in which 41.7% of respondents considered youth drain as one of the three primary consequences of the lignite phase-out. Similarly, during the Digital Workshops¹³ organized by the Green Tank to assess the progress of the transition in Western Macedonia, stakeholders and citizens, including young people, suggested various ways of supporting youth that could be incorporated into the Just Transition planning, in order to avoid their drain. However, there is no official data on youth drain from the Region of Western Macedonia, which impedes studying the issue, determining its extent and formulating policies and measures to address it.

With regard to the programming period 2021-2027, neither the programming and planning texts of the country’s funding in general, nor those concerning Western Macedonia in particular adequately recognize youth drain as a distinct problem that needs to be addressed with specific strategies and actions. These planning texts refer to the issues of unemployment, education, training and work opportunities in connection to youth, but not specifically to the phenomenon of the latter’s drain, as a consequence of socio-economic factors that need to be addressed. Specific and targeted actions to curb youth drain are also absent from the Program of the Region of Western Macedonia 2021-2027.

¹² The Green Tank (2020), “Analysis: What do the citizens of the lignite areas think about the de-lignitization and the transition to the post-lignite era?”, <https://bit.ly/3sZA0cg>

¹³ The Green Tank (2021), “The course of Just Transition in Western Macedonia- Digital Consultation Workshops: Conclusions and Recommendations”, <https://bit.ly/3wOCIUp>

Youth Policy Framework

Both European and national policies are being developed with the aim of involving youth in all sectors of society and ensuring equal opportunities in areas such as education, work or entrepreneurship. The main strategic texts of these policies are presented below.

European Youth Strategy

According to the European Youth Strategy for 2019-2027, adopted in 2018, young people today have received a better education than any previous generation and are among the most creative generations in terms of technological and communication skills. However, for the first time since World War II, this generation might be worse off than the generation that preceded it. The Strategy highlights a number of uncertainties and concerns -including climate change and demographic and socio-economic trends- that are likely to create conditions, which will exclude this generation from actively participating in political life and in co-shaping decisions concerning its future. It is an established fact that young people who are disadvantaged in terms of unemployment, poverty or education typically become less active as citizens and have less confidence in the institutions; thus, the Strategy highlights the need to remove these barriers, while stressing the importance of involving youth in political processes.

Despite several relevant initiatives taken and policies implemented by the European Union over the years, important challenges remain -most notably with regard to ensuring and increasing the participation of young people, and especially those who have been disadvantaged. Hence, one of the three pillars of the European Youth Strategy is 'Empowerment', namely, the promotion of the youth's engagement in democratic life. This engagement has two facets: young people's willingness to participate -which appears to exist, according to the Strategy- and their capability to do so, which the Member States must reinforce. Thus, according to the European Commission, emphasis should be placed, inter alia, on the following:

- i) *Promoting dialogue and participation mechanisms at all levels of the decision-making process, with particular emphasis on facilitating the submission of comments and on reaching out to youth of different backgrounds*
- ii) *Encouraging youth participation in society and in the public sphere*
- iii) *Contributing to preparing young people for this participation*

In order to achieve the above, Member States could support the relevant public authorities in adopting participatory processes, organizing activities, or facilitating/promoting the establishment of youth councils and parliaments or simulations and other participatory practices. In this context, however, it is vital that all decision-making bodies give young people the opportunity to participate, by being transparent regarding the actions taken for the youth's benefit and by reaching out to them through appropriate communication channels (e.g., social media)¹⁴.

¹⁴ European Commission (2018) "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy", Brussels, 22.5.2018 COM(2018) 269 final, <https://bit.ly/3wuh1sF>

National Strategy for Youth

The National Strategy for Youth was adopted in 2018 with a ten-year horizon from 2017 to 2027. It consists of 7 main goals, which are divided into 32 sub-goals, and their respective monitoring indexes. According to the Strategy, youth participation generates multiple benefits. In a broader sense, it promotes the proper functioning of democracies and the development of the communities in which young people live; furthermore, it boosts youth empowerment, personal development, and social inclusion, while fostering the fight against social exclusion. Thus, Goal 5 is entirely dedicated to *Strengthening Young People's Participation in Democratic Life* and has the following 5 sub-goals:

- 1) Increasing the representation of young people in the institutions of representative democracy and civil society organizations.
- 2) Increasing the participation of youth in voluntary organizations and activities.
- 3) Developing mechanisms for dialogue and consultation with young people - engaging youth in processes and decision-making structures on issues that concern them at local, national and European level.
- 4) Promoting the participation of youth who have been deprived of opportunities (e.g., Roma youth, young people of a migrant background, youth living below the poverty line, etc.) or who have been under-represented in politics and civil society organizations, taking also into account the dimension of gender.
- 5) Developing new forms of participation in democratic processes, with particular emphasis on e-participation and the role of social media.

In this context, sub-goal 3 is of particular interest, as it aims to ensure the contribution of young people in all stages of political processes (drafting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs), thus guaranteeing that the ensuing policies are respectful of their rights and serve their true interests.

Specific measures to achieve the above may include, according to the Strategy, the creation of youth advisory committees (e.g., youth forums, youth councils, etc.), as well as the provision of opportunities for all young people to participate in decision-making structures¹⁵.

Policy Framework for the Just Transition

The future of youth in lignite regions is determined by the sectoral youth policies in Europe and Greece but, more importantly, by the Just Transition policy, which will shape the economic, developmental and social future of the lignite regions. Therefore, the Just Transition policy framework should be clearly communicated to young people, so that they can take advantage of the opportunities offered by the transition. Furthermore, the complementarity of youth and Just Transition policies is key in order to ensure that all available resources are used to the benefit of young people in lignite areas. For these reasons, the main points of the European Just Transition policy are described below, along with the progress of the transition in Greece.

¹⁵ General Secretariat for Youth and Lifelong Learning, Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs (2018), "Strategy Framework for Youth Empowerment", <https://bit.ly/3SDrYjS>

Just Transition Mechanism

In 2019, the European Commission announced the European Green Deal (EGD), namely, the European Union's main development strategy that aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. The measures and policies taken towards this goal must ensure that this transition is implemented in a just and inclusive way, namely, leaving no-one behind.

A key instrument for achieving this goal is the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM), which aims to address the social and economic impacts of the transition to a carbon-neutral economy by supporting those regions that are dependent on carbon-intensive activities, such as mining and burning of lignite and coal. The JTM is financed by the European Union budget, the European Investment Bank and private resources. It is supported by three distinct pillars: the Just Transition Fund (JTF), InvestEU and public sector loan facilities¹⁶.

The JTF is the key pillar of the Mechanism and the main instrument *“to provide support to the people, economies and environment of territories which face serious socio-economic challenges deriving from the transition process towards the Union’s 2030 targets for energy and climate as defined in point (11) of Article 2 of Regulation (EU) 2018/1999 of the European Parliament and of the Council (15) and a climate-neutral economy of the Union by 2050”*¹⁷. The relevant Regulation was adopted and the fund was established in June 2021; it will allocate €17.5 billion¹⁸ to the regions in transition, while it is expected to boost investments of almost €30 billion, by leveraging its resources with those of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund+.

A prerequisite for the disbursement of these funds is that Member States prepare Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTTPs) for each of the regions in transition on their territory; these plans are approved by the European Commission through a negotiation process with the Member States. TJTTPs should, inter alia, identify the territories and sectors to be funded, set out specific objectives and actions to which resources will be channeled, and describe the governance mechanisms and structures that will operate in order to implement the transition in each Member State¹⁹.

TJTTPs should be developed by Member States through public consultation and in cooperation with relevant stakeholders. This requirement derives from the provisions of the EU’s JTF Regulation (Article 11), which specifies the mechanisms, stating that they must consist of:

- (a) partnerships;
- (b) monitoring and evaluation measures;
- (c) bodies responsible for coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the plan, while the role of these bodies must be well defined²⁰.

¹⁶ European Commission (2019), "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: “A European Green Deal”, Brussels, 11.12.2019, COM(2019) 640 final, <https://bit.ly/3wnhcop>

¹⁷ Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund, Article 1, L 231/6, <https://bit.ly/3Lq0BWk>

¹⁸ This amount (€17.5 billion) refers to 2018 prices. In current prices, it is estimated at €19.2 billion.

¹⁹ European Commission, “The Just Transition Fund”, <https://bit.ly/3NgZ6Lw>

²⁰ Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund, <https://bit.ly/3Lq0BWk>

In addition, according to the Union's Common Provisions Regulation (CPR), Article 8, the partnerships must include at least the following categories of partners:

- (a) civil and other public authorities
- (b) economic and social partners
- (c) relevant bodies representing civil society, environmental partners and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion, fundamental rights, rights of persons with disabilities, gender equality and non-discrimination
- (d) research organizations and universities (where appropriate)²¹.

It becomes clear that citizen -and, in particular, youth- participation is essential for the success of the transition, and this is reflected in the provisions of the JTM. Indeed, the Union's Common Provisions Regulation leaves a very open field for the participation of local communities and, therefore, for youth organizations as well. For this reason, in addition to involving young people in shaping and implementing transition planning, specific actions should be provided for young people, so that resources can be channeled accordingly.

Based on the latest available data presented on the Just Transition Platform²², progress in the preparation, submission, assessment and final adoption of the TJTPs by the European Commission has been slow. Sixteen Member States have submitted informal draft plans to the European Commission (just two more than in November 2021), while only five of them are being reviewed by Member States following the European Commission's preliminary input. Moreover, merely three Member States (Austria, Greece and Finland²³) had formally submitted their TJTPs by May 2022 (one more than in November 2021) for final evaluation by the European Commission. The first JTF program, that of Greece, was adopted in June 2022²⁴.

The Just Transition in Greece

With regard to Greece, the signal for Just Transition was given by the September 2019 announcement of a complete lignite phase-out by 2028 at the latest²⁵. Up to that point, little had been done to prepare the country's lignite areas for the transition to the post-lignite era. Similarly, essentially no action had been taken to prepare young people for the ensuing rapid change in the production model of these regions.

An exception has been the joint effort of the mayors of the lignite areas, together with environmental NGOs and think tanks, to secure resources from the auctioning of emission allowances in order to support the shift of lignite areas' local economies towards a sustainable direction. This effort that was launched in 2015 met success in 2018, when the so-called "National Just Transition Fund" was established. At that time, 6% of the annual public revenues

²¹ Regulation 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy, <https://bit.ly/3LDZQcF>

²² Presentation (10 May 2022), "Update on the preparation of territorial just transition plans", 5th Meeting of the Just Transition Platform, Coal Regions in Transition Virtual Week, <https://bit.ly/3wMUar8>

²³ Informal briefing

²⁴ European Commission, 16.06.2022, <https://bit.ly/3yFDkeC>

²⁵ Speech by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the Climate Summit (23.9.2019), <https://bit.ly/3wY7sBf>

from the auctioning of emission allowances were channeled into this Fund, in order to develop specific sustainable economic activities in Greece's lignite areas; this corresponded to approximately €30 million for 2018. By 2021, the funds raised from the auctioning of emission allowances amounted to €112 million, currently managed by the Green Fund. Nevertheless, up until the announcement of the decision to phase out lignite, neither local authorities nor national governments had moved forward with planning or taken any steps to attract investment for the development of sustainable economic activities in the lignite areas.

The situation started to change in March 2020, when the drafting of the Just Development Transition Plan (SDAM) -the so-called Master Plan- began; the latter would constitute a “roadmap for restructuring the production model of the transition areas”. The first draft was completed in a few months and was set to public consultation between October and November 2020; the final version, which incorporated comments from the public consultation, was published in December 2020²⁶.

Furthermore, following the drafting of the Just Transition Fund Regulation and in line with the guidelines of the European Union, Greece identified the areas under transition and prepared the respective TJTPs, which form the backbone of the Just Development Transition Program (PDAM) 2021-2027. The PDAM 2021-2027 constitutes the main funding instrument for the Just Transition in Greece for the current programming period. The TJTPs were initially submitted to the European Commission on 12 October 2021 and were finally approved on 16 June 2022²⁷.

Thus, Greece now has an approved Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP) for each of the three regions under transition (the Region of Western Macedonia¹⁰; the Regional Unit of Arcadia in the Peloponnese²⁸; and the islands of North and South Aegean & Crete)²⁹; and a Just Development Transition Program 2021-2027³⁰ which amounts to €1.63 billion. The Just Transition Fund is the core funding source of the PDAM 2021-2027, which also reflects the synergies and complementarity with the other Programs and actions of the Partnership Agreement 2021-2027, the new Recovery and Resilience Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

Finally, the Just Transition framework is completed by Law 4872/2021, entitled “Just Development Transition, regulation of specific issues related to the lignite phase-out, and other urgent provisions”³¹; this Law addresses the governance mechanism of the Just Transition, while it also regulates specific issues for a faster and more effective implementation of the Just Transition strategic planning.

²⁶ Ministry of Environment and Energy (December 2020), “Updated Master Plan for the Just Development Transition of Lignite Areas”, <https://bit.ly/3dI4NTt>

²⁷ European Commission (June 2022), Commission Implementing Decision of 16.06.2022 approving the programme “Just Development Transition” for support from the Just Transition Fund under the “Investment for jobs and growth” goal in Greece, <https://bit.ly/3aGiNPb>

²⁸ Territorial Just Transition Plan of Megalopolis, European Commission Decision C(2022)3943, <https://bit.ly/3ICx4c8>

²⁹ Territorial Just Transition Plan of the North and South Aegean Islands & Crete, European Commission Decision C 2022)3943, <https://bit.ly/3RxD1O>

³⁰ Just Development Transition Program 2021-2027, European Commission Decision C(2022)3943, <https://bit.ly/3z2Bar0>

³¹ Law 4872/2021, Government Gazette 247/A/10-12-2021, <https://bit.ly/3llmWnG>

However, to date, the youth of lignite areas are not mentioned in the aforementioned Law nor in the transition planning, as they are not represented in any institutional way in the lignite areas and, thus, have not had any structured intervention in the consultation processes of the transition plans (SDAM, TJTPs, PDAM). This highlights the lack of inclusiveness and the “top-down” nature of the planning process, but also the steps that need to be taken to establish youth as a distinct and dynamic pillar of the Just Transition in Greece. If the young men and women of Western Macedonia cannot 'see' themselves in the planning and implementation of the Just Transition, if they do not 'own' the changes that occur in the region in which they live and work, then justice cannot be guaranteed, putting the very success of the transition in jeopardy.

Youth in the Just Transition Governance Mechanism

Youth participation in the Just Transition is of particular importance in the case of Greece, as well as in all European lignite regions. As described above, the governance mechanism provided in both the JTM and the EU's CPR gives Member States plenty of opportunities to include youth in the transition governance structures.

In fact, via the Commission Staff Working Document on Territorial Just Transition Plans, published in September 2019 as a guide for the preparation of the TJTPs, the European Commission clearly highlights the importance of youth participation in the governance of the Just Transition. As stated, *“it is essential for young people to be actively involved in the JTF’s governance. A future-proof economy cannot be built without involving those who will live in and shape the future. The JTF is about inventing a new economic and social future for these areas, and young people must play an active role in this”*³².

Subsequently, in January 2021, the European Commission (Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy, DG REGIO) published a toolkit to support youth participation in the Just Transition, with the aim of providing practical advice to Member States so as to include young people in the transition. This document is a comprehensive guide³³ that suggests methods to involve young people at all stages of the JTM life-cycle and concludes with concrete recommendations; moreover, it presents good practices from several European countries on involving youth in initiatives related to the environment, energy and climate.

This toolkit focuses on the steps relevant authorities should take to ensure effective youth participation; more specifically, it addresses the way in which young people should be approached, emphasizing that youth should be an equal 'player' from the outset and should be involved in the transition with clear objectives and a specific purpose. To this end, the rules of participation should be drawn up in consultation with youth representatives. Furthermore, in order to ensure maximum participation, the toolkit calls for all communication and information channels to be employed, while stressing the need to build cooperative relations between local actors and youth. Particular emphasis is also placed on the need for youth to be involved at all stages of the transition process (planning, implementation, monitoring) and have an active role through consultations and projects. Given that youth is not homogeneous, it is recommended that particular attention be paid to reaching out to those most isolated or marginalized. In any case, however, all communications regarding the transition and its opportunities and consequences should be adapted to the ways and needs of young people. The monitoring phase is also equally important; therefore, monitoring procedures should be implemented in order for young people to comprehend the impact of their interventions and verify whether or not their recommendations have been adopted. The aim is to involve youth on an ongoing basis, so as to ensure that they remain engaged in the transition process in the long-run.

In fact, the toolkit’s section on best practices regarding youth mobilization highlights many types of engagement/participation, such as structured dialogue, youth councils, youth

³² European Commission (2021), “European Commission Staff Working Document on the Territorial Just Transition Plans”, <https://bit.ly/38S6Lla>

³³ European Union (2021a), “Youth for a Just Transition: a toolkit for Youth Participation in the Just Transition Fund”, <https://bit.ly/3Pvqfwg>

parliaments, “ambassadors” programs, mentoring and entrepreneurship workshops and initiatives, youth funds, etc.³⁴.

On a final note, youth participation in the planning and implementation of the Just Transition is increasingly being discussed on the Just Transition Platform³⁵, indicating that people in lignite regions consider it to be -together with the economic and technological aspects of the transition- an issue of high significance.

Youth Participation in the Just Transition in Europe

As analyzed in the previous section, the European Commission stresses the importance of young people’s civic engagement. However, beyond the Commission’s recommendations, it is important to understand the actual organization and participation levels of European youth in public processes, and in the Just Transition in particular.

In Europe, according to a recent European Parliament Eurobarometer on youth, the level of organization and actual participation in processes remains low. Merely 15% have taken part in a public consultation and only 14% have joined a youth organization, even though 46% have participated in elections, either at local or EU level. In fact, in a question aimed at identifying barriers to participation, 25% stated that they were not old enough to vote and 15% that they were simply not interested enough. The remaining 60% was split among the other 8 responses; the highest percentage of these respondents identified with the statement “*I don't believe that decision makers listen to people like me*” (13%), while 9% selected the response “*No one has ever asked or invited me*” to participate³⁶.

At the same time, according to a pan-European climate change survey³⁷, 46% of Europe's youth consider climate change to be the most important issue -even compared to the Covid-19 pandemic. For youth, however, there appears to be a gap between acknowledging the issue and being motivated to take concrete action. While 25% of young people vote for politicians who prioritize climate change, only 10% are actively involved in action groups. In fact, the survey suggests that young people aged 15-19 are more decisive when it comes to participating in actions such as a peaceful climate demonstration. The latter finding is interpreted by the survey as a result of the “school strikes for climate” movement (better known as “Fridays for Future”), which was initiated by Greta Thunberg and spread worldwide, mainly to major urban centers.

Thus, being willing to participate but ultimately not participating seems to be the trend for youth across Europe, and it is also confirmed in the case of the transition. A recent study on youth involvement in the Just Transition revealed that youth participated in TJTP development

³⁴ European Union (2021b), “Annex: Youth for a Just Transition: good practices of youth engagement”, <https://bit.ly/38B3AOs>

³⁵ Indicatively: Presentation (12 May 2022), “The Power of Youth: Panel discussion with Commissioners Ferreira and Schmit and youth representatives”, 5th Meeting of the Just Transition Platform, Coal Regions in Transition Virtual Week, <https://bit.ly/3wTCNVw> & Panel (19 November 2020), “Involving the youth in the just transition”, 2nd Meeting of the Just Transition Platform, Coal Regions in Transition Virtual Week, <https://bit.ly/38JdcHb>

³⁶ European Parliament (2021), “European Parliament Youth Survey – September 2021 Report”, <https://bit.ly/3sWGF75>

³⁷ IPSOS (2021), Pan-European Survey, Main multi-country report, <https://bit.ly/30iqsB3>

procedures only in 7 of the 12 EU Member States included in the sample. Moreover, their participation primarily involved providing feedback on completed drafts; thus, their ability to provide a meaningful input and actively engage in planning was significantly limited³⁸.

There are, however, exceptions. The case of Ireland is of particular interest: the consultation process for Just Transition planning and TJTP development included three workshops, one of which was exclusively dedicated to young people aged 16-24 who were living, working or studying in the region under transition. The workshop was organized in February 2022 in cooperation with national youth organizations and was open to both individuals and youth associations. Participants responded to questions regarding the future of the region, namely, how they imagine it to be, what kind of employment opportunities they would like to see flourish, and what new skills and specializations they consider necessary in the post-transition era. They were also asked whether they are aware of the environmental projects and programs currently being developed in their region, as well as to indicate the projects which should be promoted. Finally, respondents were asked to suggest a newspaper headline from the future, which would explain how their region -currently a region in transition to a carbon-neutral economy- had become a great place to live, work and visit. During the workshop, young people had the opportunity to express their hopes and aspirations for their region and for a climate-neutral and sustainable future³⁹.

Moreover, young people across Europe have taken action and have participated in the transition in their own manner. For instance, students at the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, Slovakia⁴⁰, motivated by their interest in the transition process -with regard to their region in general and the Upper Nitra area in particular- conducted a survey of young people to explore the factors that determine their decision making regarding their future. The results of this survey revealed that their decisions were mainly influenced by the following parameters: job opportunities; family's current location; and the quality of the environment (including park infrastructure, green spaces, cycling trails etc., as well as city aesthetics). The results of this research were presented at a workshop organized by the Ministry of Investment and Regional Development, highlighting the need for youth participation in the planning of the Upper Nitra region's post-lignite future.

Youth Participation in the Just Transition in Greece

According to the European Parliament's recent Eurobarometer on Youth, in Greece, 35% of young people discuss political and social issues among friends (second only to Luxembourg with 37%), while they give top priority to forming their own opinions, scoring higher than the EU average (8.3/10)⁴¹. Furthermore, participation in elections (43%) is regarded as the most effective way to make their voice heard, followed by participation in public consultations (24%) and participation in youth organizations (11%). When questioned regarding the importance of

³⁸ Generation Climate Europe and CEE Bankwatch Network (2022), "The state of youth engagement in the implementation of the EU's Just Transition Mechanism", <https://bit.ly/3LJEaT>

³⁹ Public Consultation on the EU Just Transition Fund in Ireland: Final Report (March 2022), <https://bit.ly/3z4Hcld>

⁴⁰ Just Transition (17.06.2021), "Listen to the young when planning for just transition, say Slovakian students", <https://bit.ly/3O5bPRE>

⁴¹ European Parliament (2021), "European Parliament Youth Survey – September 2021 Report", <https://bit.ly/3sWGF75>

their political and civic participation, the response “participation in elections” scores very high (7.7/10), indicating that young people actually want to have an opinion and take part in public life. Nevertheless, while the willingness to participate is at high levels, actual participation is much less impressive. For instance, responses reveal that only one in ten young Greeks (10%) has participated in a public consultation; similarly, just 11% have ever joined a youth organization. Despite the gap between intention and reality, young Greeks’ participation in elections -whether at European, national or local level- remains higher than the EU average (57% in Greece compared to 46% in the EU).

Thus, while youth are not indifferent to social and political issues, when it comes to the Just Transition in Greece, their participation is practically non-existent. Since its establishment within the framework of the JTM, the transition governance mechanism in Greece has been characterized by a purely top-down rationale; issues of adequate participation and representation arise at all levels -from the highest to the lowest- as local authorities, local communities and civil society are insufficiently represented in the composition of the governance mechanism’s structures⁴². Young people, along with any organizations representing them, are also entirely absent from all structures; moreover, they were never involved in the planning phase. Indeed, the mere fact that not a single youth organization was selected to receive the questionnaires sent to local stakeholders^{43,44,45} (in the form of a closed consultation) regarding the TJTPs can attest to their exclusion during planning. The youth’s absence from all governance structures not only excludes them from the -now completed- planning process but also prevents their future engagement in the implementation of the transition, since they do not have the opportunity to participate in an institutionalized and organized manner. These circumstances stand in stark contrast to both the European Youth Strategy, which promotes the participation of young people at all levels of decision-making, and the national strategy on youth, which has called for all young people to have the opportunity to participate in decision-making structures. In particular, the National Youth Strategy sets out the following indices to measure the effectiveness of youth participation:

- the number of consultations held each year between the State and young people on issues that concern them, and the percentage of young people who take part in these consultations (e.g., consultations carried out by Ministries on draft laws, etc.)
- the percentage of young people who take part in consultations carried out at local level, in the context of Law 3852/2010⁴⁵.

⁴² The Green Tank (2021), "The governance of just transition in Greece and in Europe", <https://bit.ly/3wLb1K>

⁴³ Just Development Transition Coordinating Committee (2021), "Preparation of the Territorial Just Transition Plan for the Region of Western Macedonia", Athens 08.02.2021, Ref. No. 27, <https://bit.ly/3t2lbsx>

⁴⁴ Just Development Transition Coordinating Committee (2021), "Preparation of the Territorial Just Transition Plan for Megalopolis", Athens 08.02.2021, Ref. No. 28, <https://bit.ly/3NDVe7x>

⁴⁵ Just Development Transition Coordinating Committee (2021), "Preparation of the Territorial Just Transition Plan for the North Aegean Islands, South Aegean and Crete", Athens, 28.04.2021, Ref. no 78, <https://bit.ly/3wQ7vj0>

On the other hand, an opinion survey⁴⁶ prepared and analyzed by Green Tank, in collaboration with diANEOsis and Professor Emmanouella Doussis of the University of Athens (EKPA), and carried out by research company Marc during the public consultation on the SDAM, showed that young people see the lignite phase-out as an opportunity to change the development model of the lignite areas and are optimistic about their future. Specifically, the survey found that 59.3% and 48.6% of respondents aged 17-24 and 25-39, respectively, regard the lignite phase-out as an opportunity. Furthermore, unemployment was identified by 75.9% of young individuals aged 17-24 as the biggest issue caused by the retirement of lignite plants, followed by the economic crisis/poverty (50%) and youth drain/desertification/internal migration (28.7%). The corresponding percentages for young people aged 25-39 are 84.7% (unemployment), 58.6% (economic crisis/poverty) and 43.2% (youth drain/desertification/internal migration). Interestingly, 66.7% and 50.5% of respondents aged 17-24 and 25-39, respectively, were not aware of the consultation on the SDAM, while over 60% in both categories had no intention of participating in it. Finally, young respondents in both age groups ranked local community involvement as the third most important element for a successful transition, behind a comprehensive plan and adequate funding.

⁴⁶ The Green Tank (2020), "Analysis: What do the citizens of the lignite areas think about the de-lignitization and the transition to the post-lignite era?", <https://bit.ly/3M3duGl>

Youth in Funding Programs

The dimension of youth is usually included in programs for social policy, unemployment, education and training, and support for vulnerable groups. Within the new programming period 2021-2027, there are several sources of funding -both from European and national resources- for actions and projects that are relevant to young people, either specifically or in a broader development policy context.

European youth policies have been traditionally financed by the **European Social Fund+** in the context of employment, social affairs and social inclusion policy; each Member State's funding programs are then shaped accordingly, so as to absorb these resources. In particular, European measures to support youth employment⁴⁷ are developed along four axes:

- (a) the "Youth Guarantee", adopted in 2013 and thereafter implemented to reach out to vulnerable young people aged 15-29 across the EU⁴⁸;
- (b) vocational education and training;
- (c) apprenticeships; and
- (d) additional employment support measures, such as short-term incentives for employment and start-ups, and, in the medium term, establishment of networks for young entrepreneurs, skill building, etc.

The category of young individuals who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs) is also at the heart of the EU's sphere of interest. According to the relevant data, the percentage of youth in this category is particularly high in Western Macedonia (17% in 2021) and above the average of the 96 lignite regions of the EU (13% in 2021). In an effort to support NEETs, the EU introduced the Youth Employment Initiative (**YEI**)⁴⁹, an important funding resource for the implementation of Youth Guarantee schemes until 2023. Launched in 2013 to support young people living in areas where youth unemployment was higher than 25%, the YEI is exclusively addressed to NEETs, including those who are long-term unemployed or not registered as jobseekers; its purpose is to ensure that young people living in the most deprived areas of Europe can receive targeted support. Furthermore, the European Commission has launched the **ALMA** (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve) initiative to help disadvantaged and vulnerable NEETs aged 18-30. ALMA's aim is to widen employment and training opportunities so that NEETs can find their place in the labor market⁵⁰. In addition to the EU Cohesion Programs to support NEETs, the YEI is complemented by the Youth Employment Fund, which is backed by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway (**EEA Grants**). This Fund has a transnational focus and assists bodies across Europe in pooling their efforts to find new ways to reduce youth unemployment⁵¹.

In addition, the NextGenerationEU program and the EU budget include resources for youth, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic recovery plan⁵². These resources can be used by Member States to support youth employment, and in particular to finance the following: grants and start-

⁴⁷ European Commission, Youth employment support, <https://bit.ly/3uKK6Pi>

⁴⁸ European Commission (22.04.2013), Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee, <https://bit.ly/3z2HK0I>

⁴⁹ European Commission, Youth Employment Initiative, <https://bit.ly/3yuq9xe>

⁵⁰ European Commission, ALMA (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve), <https://bit.ly/3c82oDB>

⁵¹ EEA Grants, Fund for Youth Employment, <https://bit.ly/3chemLr>

⁵² European Commission, Recovery plan for Europe, <https://bit.ly/3u01HWv>

up loans for young entrepreneurs, as well as mentoring programs for start-ups; premiums for media companies that hire apprentices; training seminars for the acquisition of new skills that are in demand in the labor market; skill building programs in public employment services; training programs regarding career management in educational settings; investments in digital learning infrastructure and technology.

Moreover, and in an effort to reinforce youth participation in the Just Transition, the European Commission has launched and directly finances the EUTeens4Green initiative. Through the latter, young people aged 15-24 in lignite regions are invited to implement pilot projects for a more participatory transition; these shall focus on raising awareness and increasing the engagement of young people who are oblivious to the opportunities the green transition has to offer and the impact it will have on both their professional and everyday life. This initiative aims to finance at least 70 projects by teenagers, with each project receiving funding of up to €10,000 and having a maximum duration of 12 months⁵³.

In particular, with regard to Greece, the current programming period will see for the first time the implementation of the Just Development Transition Program 2021-2027 (PDAM), which draws resources from the JTM and constitutes the main financial mechanism for the transition to the post-lignite period. At the same time, through the Partnership Agreement for the period 2021-2027, resources will also be provided by other funds striving to meet the objectives of the EU Cohesion Policy. The main programs concerning the Region of Western Macedonia are listed and analyzed below, along with the resources that will be available -in a broader sense or specifically- to youth.

Special Transitional Just Transition Development Program 2020- 2023 (EMeP DAM)

Until the full activation of the Just Transition Development Program 2021-2027, a Special Transitional Just Transition Development Program for the period 2020-2023 is being implemented. This program builds on the potential of the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) 2014-2020, the Green Fund, as well as other financing sources such as the Recovery Fund.

The 2020-2023 Special Transitional Just Transition Development Program⁵⁴ was designed by the Just Development Transition Plan Technical Committee (TESDAM) -in cooperation with Greece's Manpower Employment Organization (OAED) and the General Secretariat for Public Investment and NSRF- and approved by the Government Committee; with a budget of €107 million for two years (€50m. for 2021 and €56.9m. for 2022), it includes four programs supporting employment in the lignite areas. OAED's social action package targets both lignite regions of the country, namely, Western Macedonia and Megalopolis; it focuses on strengthening employment in general, as well as specifically with regard to the youth, through a specialized program. The aforementioned programs are as follows:

1. *Creation of New Jobs*: this entails the recruitment of unemployed individuals by companies in new full-time positions with attractive terms and conditions, such as

⁵³ European Commission, EUTeens4Green, <https://bit.ly/3Psl2oi>

⁵⁴ SDAM, Special Transitional Just Development Transition Program (EMeP DAM) 2020-2023, <https://bit.ly/3FyaobF>

increased wage and contribution subsidies, simplified requirements, faster participation and payment procedures, etc.

2. *Youth Work Experience*: this is addressed to young unemployed persons of 18 to 29 years of age and concerns the acquisition of work experience with 100% coverage of salary and contributions during their employment in local businesses.
3. *Relocation Grant*: This refers to subsidizing local businesses to hire unemployed individuals from the wider area and to cover their relocation and accommodation costs.
4. *Counselling, Training and Employment*: This program, which will be implemented in cooperation with the municipalities of the lignite areas, concerns the provision of both counselling services to the unemployed (e.g., vocational orientation, skill development and upgrading through training) and subsidies to businesses to promote recruitment.

To date, OAED has announced programs worth €94 million, specifically for areas in transition, while programs worth €21.5 million are expected to be launched in the coming period.

In particular, the implementation of OAED's social action package began in November 2021 with two programs budgeted at €62 million for a total of 5,400 new jobs. These programs concern: (a) employment subsidies for the recruitment -in full-time positions- of 3,400 unemployed former employees of enterprises in the Regions of Western Macedonia and the Peloponnese that were affected by the consequences of the lignite phase-out⁵⁵, and b) the acquisition of work experience, available to 2,000 unemployed persons aged 18-29 in the Region of Western Macedonia (1,450 places) and in the Municipalities of Megalopolis, Tripoli, Gortynia, Sparta, Oichalia and Kalamata of the Peloponnese Region (550 places)⁵⁶.

The first program has a duration of 12-18 months and a total budget of €48 million, and the salary and contribution subsidy rate ranges between 75-100%; an extension has been granted for applications until December 2022⁵⁷. In April 2022, the beneficiaries of the program were expanded to include unemployed individuals of all ages, including young people, who have been registered with OAED for a period of at least one month and who were employed from 1/1/2019 onwards in enterprises within the Regions of Kozani and Florina and the Municipality of Megalopolis⁵⁸.

The second program, with a duration of 7 months and a total budget of €14 million, is exclusively addressed to young persons aged 18-29. In December 2021 it was still open to applications⁵⁷ and will remain so until all positions are filled.

⁵⁵ OAED, Special program to subsidize companies for the employment of 3,400 unemployed former employees of enterprises affected by the lignite phase-out in the regions of Western Macedonia and the Peloponnese, <https://bit.ly/3ymUSxN>

⁵⁶ OAED, Special Pre-employment Program for 2,000 unemployed young people 18-29 years old, in areas affected by the impact of the lignite phase-out in the Regions of Western Macedonia and the Peloponnese, <https://bit.ly/3KVoi91>

⁵⁷ OAED, Press Release (20.12.2021), "Extension of applications until 7 January for the program regarding 3,400 new employment positions, in the context of the just transition to the post-lignite era", <https://bit.ly/3GLb4eB>

⁵⁸ OAED Press Release (06.04.2022), "Expansion of beneficiaries in the program regarding 3,400 new employment positions in the context of the just transition to the post-lignite era", <https://bit.ly/3P4YuKC>

April 2022 saw the launch of another program to support the unemployed in transition regions, the *"Business grant program for the employment of unemployed individuals aged 30 and over in transition regions, with a focus on women, Cycle 3"*⁵⁹. With a duration of 12 months and a budget of €32 million, it is addressed to businesses operating in the Regions of Western Macedonia, Central Greece, the Ionian Islands, the Peloponnese, North Aegean and Crete and was open for applications until 27.05.2022.

The following OAED programs, with a total budget of €21.5 million⁶⁰, are also expected to launch in the coming period so as to support employment in regions in transition:

- *Vocational training and skills certification* for 3000 unemployed individuals, of which 2000 will come from the Region of Western Macedonia, budgeted at €18 million.
- *Counselling Actions* for 3000 positions budgeted at €1.2 million.
- *Relocation grant* for the creation of 200 jobs in the Municipalities of Kozani, Florina and Megalopolis, for a period of 12 months, with a budget of €2.3 million.

As of mid-March 2022, 1014 full-time positions were filled through OAED's employment support programs in the lignite regions, of which, 796 were in the Region of Western Macedonia (78.5%) and 218 in the Region of the Peloponnese (21.5%). Among the beneficiaries, 672 were women (66.3%), while 457 had completed higher education (45.1%). The vast majority (926 out of 1014 of employment positions or 91.3%) were absorbed by very small businesses, highlighting the potential of local entrepreneurship in meeting the challenges of transition⁶¹.

TJTPs and PDAM 2021-2027

The main funding instrument for the Just Transition is the 2021-2027 Just Transition Program (PDAM) with €1.63 billion (€1.4 billion for lignite areas). For an investment and/or action to be financed by the JTF, it needs to be compatible with the TJTPs.

In the case of Western Macedonia, the Just Transition preliminary plans (SDAM, PDAM, TJTP) did not foresee actions and specific axes regarding youth. However, youth is specifically mentioned in the 2021-2027 TJTP and PDAM texts that have now been adopted by the European Commission. In particular, the Western Macedonia TJTP acknowledges the problem of youth drain, which deprives the Region of the human capital necessary for its development, as well as the high unemployment rate among young people aged 15-24 and the gradual impoverishment affecting the youth and the most vulnerable⁶². Nevertheless, even though the approved PDAM 2021-2027 secures resources for young people, it lacks targeted actions to specifically address the problem of youth drain. The latter is addressed within the broader employment retention and social cohesion programs in the lignite areas, rather than separately,

⁵⁹ OAED, Press Release (07.04.2022), "Applications open on Monday for the third cycle of the program subsidizing 5,000 unemployed individuals aged 30 and over, with a focus on women, in 6 regions", <https://bit.ly/3Pcql5V>

⁶⁰ Presentation of the Deputy Regional Governor for the Just Development Transition in the Region of Western Macedonia at the open event "New development law and investment opportunities in Western Macedonia" (May 2022), <https://bit.ly/3PcnK1h> and <https://bit.ly/3caciEL>

⁶¹ Region of Western Macedonia, Press Release (11.04.2022), "Update on the progress of the OAED programs for lignite areas (Just Development Transition Vice-Region)", <https://bit.ly/3P933n0>

⁶² Territorial Just Transition Plan for Western Macedonia, European Commission Decision C (2022) 3943, Chapter 2: Assessment of transition challenges for each of the identified territories, <https://bit.ly/3uKV4UP>

through dedicated actions and resources. The PDAM's Priority 4 ("Just Labor Transition") reserves €280.55 million to address the socio-economic consequences of the transition via interventions to adapt the skills and occupations of the labor force to the new, post-lignite production activities. Youth are among the beneficiaries of these resources; specifically, €22.95 million will be channeled to support youth employment and socio-economic integration.

NSRF 2021-2027

The Partnership Agreement with Greece - 2021-2027 (new NSRF) is financed by the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027 and covers the programming of: the European Regional Development Fund; the Cohesion Fund; the Just Transition Fund; the European Social Fund+ (ESF+); and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund. A distinct Operational Program (the PDAM 2021-2027) has been prepared with regard to JTF resources, as previously mentioned. A separate program has also been drafted regarding the ESF+, while the latter shall co-finance actions in other projects. In addition, sectoral and regional operational programs are being prepared to utilize the resources of the other funds that support the objectives of the EU Cohesion Policy for the period 2021-2027⁶³. A Regional Operational Program is being drawn up for each of Greece's 13 administrative Regions, including actions of regional scope that will serve these objectives. A total of €8.1 billion will be allocated to the 13 regional programs, while the 8 sectoral programs will absorb €17.6 billion. The new NSRF will amount to €26.2 billion for Greece for the period 2021-2027. In particular, at least 14% of Greece's total ESF+ share will cover youth employment nationwide, under the specific priority for Youth Employment set in the "Human Resources and Social Cohesion" Sectoral Program. Furthermore, actions targeting youth will be carried out in the context of other Programs, also in line with the National Youth Guarantee Action Plan⁶⁴. It is worth noting that 30% of all resources will be geared towards achieving Policy Objective 4: A more social Europe. The programs that will be implemented specifically in Western Macedonia are listed below.

The Program of the Region of Western Macedonia 2021-2027

The Program of the Region of Western Macedonia 2021-2027 (P-RWM)⁶⁵ is a subset of the Partnership Agreement with Greece for 2021-2027 (new NSRF); it reflects the development vision for this Region by listing the axes, to which the available resources of the new programming period will be dedicated. Specifically, the P-RWM 2021-2027 is budgeted at €349.1 million, while the respective program's budget in the previous programming period (2014-2020) was €340 million⁶⁶.

Among the Region's key priorities and development needs towards Objective 4: A more Social Europe, the P-RWM identifies, inter alia, the following: creating new jobs, especially for youth and women; fostering and drawing on social economy; supporting the occupational transition of the workforce affected by the lignite phase-out; promoting lifelong learning and widening

⁶³ Cohesion Policy priorities are developed into five main objectives and, in particular, relate to a smarter, greener, more connected, more social Europe that is closer to its citizens. <https://bit.ly/3z85nFu>

⁶⁴ National Youth Guarantee Action Plan - Review of the Action Plan for 2018-2020, (2018), <https://bit.ly/3POXr1Z>

⁶⁵ Program of the Region of Western Macedonia 2021-2027, <https://bit.ly/3M2CQUA>

⁶⁶ Ministry of Development and Investments, (2021), Presentation of the new NSRF, <https://bit.ly/3z43z0l>

vulnerable groups' access to education and training; and completing the infrastructure of the University of Western Macedonia. However, the program does not outline specific, targeted actions for any of the above. Actions related to youth are also included under other policy objectives, mainly with regard to boosting entrepreneurship and fostering innovation.

Under specific objective ESO4.1: Improving Access to Employment, the program will fund interventions aimed at integrating the unemployed into the labor market; training the unemployed with a focus on smart specialization strategy areas; and promoting social and solidarity economy. State aids will be used to support private sector enterprises that will employ beneficiaries through New Job Opportunities (NJO) actions. Moreover, unemployed individuals who wish to set up their own business and, thus, be self-employed will be supported by the New Freelance Professionals (NFP) actions. These interventions ultimately aim to, on the one hand, contain the drain of the working-age population and particularly youth, and, on the other hand, match the skills of the workforce to the needs of the new production model planned for the Region. It is estimated that 4,496 unemployed people, 283 micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises and 25 social and solidarity economy bodies (both existing and new) will benefit from these interventions by 2029. In addition, it is expected that 3,369 beneficiaries will have acquired a specialization upon program completion, while 498 will find employment 6 months following their participation in the programs; furthermore, these interventions forecast that one year upon completion, 20 existing and new social and solidarity economy bodies will continue operating and 84 NJOs will be retained in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The interventions in this category are budgeted at **€19.975 million**.

Sectoral Programs

Among the eight (8) sectoral programs of the new programming period, the sectoral program “Human Resources & Social Cohesion 2021-2027” includes the most relevant actions and measures for youth. This program is budgeted at €4.1 billion for the entire country and sets youth employment as a key priority. In particular, it targets NEETs up to 29 years of age, foreseeing actions to address unemployment and to ensure their sustainable integration into the labor market, through the implementation of apprenticeships and interventions to boost skill acquisition and facilitate labor market placement, while also including information and awareness-raising activities (Priority 5). The budget allocated to Priority 5 is €663 million. In addition, the flagship projects of strategic importance provide for the following: (a) Support for Apprenticeships available to young individuals up to 29 years of age (in the year after completing vocational upper-secondary school); (b) Subsidies for new jobs for 35,000 young people with no previous work experience (1st pension credit); and c) Programs to support and strengthen youth entrepreneurship, with a focus on green, digital and blue economy and high growth sectors⁶⁷.

The sectoral program “Competitiveness” 2021-2027, with a total budget of €3.9 billion, reflects Greece’s new development priorities and is organized along axes, one of which is “*Human Capital Development in the context of development transformation*”. The other axes concern research and innovation, digital transformation and SMEs. Inter alia, the program will support entrepreneurship, through the development of micro and small enterprises, giving priority to

⁶⁷ Sectoral Program “Human Resources & Social Cohesion 2021-2027”, October 2021, <https://bit.ly/3GDPPeA>

innovative business ideas, with the ultimate goal of creating sustainable jobs. It will also focus on skill reinforcement and development, in order to gear the workforce towards new markets and opportunities drawing on innovation and technology⁶⁸. The Smart Specialization strategy, which links innovation and entrepreneurship, will also be implemented through this program. The “Human Capital Development in the context of development transformation” axis may not be exclusively addressed to youth, but it describes actions that can be of benefit to young scientists and entrepreneurs. Especially with regard to the lignite regions, where the transformation of the production model is a key issue, this program can bolster youth entrepreneurship.

The two sectoral programs mentioned above can also contribute to the development of the social and solidarity economy model, which is an alternative type of entrepreneurship that can be adopted by youth. Moreover, this form of economy is supported by several sectoral programs, which -although national rather than regional in scope- constitute another source of funding for local communities in lignite areas.

Greece’s Manpower Employment Organization (OAED) Programs and Structures

Several of the aforementioned measures described in the regional and sectoral programs are implemented by the OAED, which constitutes the official public authority and primary management structure for a wide range of policies related to supporting and strengthening the labor force. Youth are among the beneficiaries of OAED’s aid; thus, they are clearly included in its programs regarding employment; unemployment insurance; social protection of motherhood and family; and vocational education and training; as well as in social policy actions aimed at improving the living conditions of the workforce. In order to meet the above objectives, OAED pursues both active and passive employment policies. Active employment policies aim at curbing unemployment and promoting employment through the improvement of professional skills, while passive employment policies refer to unemployment insurance measures through benefits, as well as to the provision of social protection. In particular, the following actions and programs are of direct interest to youth aged 15-29:

- The Dual Apprenticeship System, which is a two-year program that combines classroom-based vocational instruction and a paid internship in an enterprise. It is addressed to middle-school graduates and youth aged 15-23. The OAED operates Vocational Apprenticeship Schools (EPAS) nationwide, covering all sectors of the economy and aiming to provide students with on-the-job training in real working conditions.
- Integrated secondary and post-secondary-school vocational education and training programs, through OAED's educational structures, such as OAED's Vocational Training Institutes (IEK), which provide their graduates with a Level 5 Vocational Specialization Diploma, and Vocational Training Centers (KEK), which implement targeted fast-track vocational training programs and in-company training programs.
- Work experience or pre-employment - internship programs⁶⁹.

⁶⁸ Sectoral Program “Competitiveness” 2021-2027, October 2021, <https://bit.ly/38VjC5X>

⁶⁹ OAED, <https://bit.ly/3x1raxj>

Primary Sector Programs

The resources allocated to the primary sector are also of interest to youth, as this is a traditional sector in lignite areas. In order to meet the objectives of the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023-2027, the primary sector receives funding from the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFF). In order to absorb these resources, Greece has prepared a Strategic Plan (SP) for the period 2023-2027, which is awaiting approval by the European Commission⁷⁰. The Common Agricultural Policy strategic plan, totaling €19.362 billion for Greece for the period 2023-2027, entails nine (9) specific goals, including attracting new farmers and boosting employment, both of which potentially involve youth. In particular, one of the goals foresees *attracting and retaining young and other new farmers and facilitating sustainable business development in rural areas (S07)*, as specified in the intervention "*Installation of new farmers*" (P3-75.1). The goal of this intervention, which concerns individuals up to 40 years of age, is twofold: it aims at the demographic revitalization of rural areas and at facilitating both the entry of new professionals and the creation of sustainable and competitive enterprises in the agricultural sector. This program provides a first installation premium of €40,000, which is double that of the previous programming period 2014-2020. Additional national measures are also foreseen to facilitate the installation of new farmers, such as the refund of excise tax on oil (tax incentives), which leads to a significant reduction in operating costs.

The Rural Development Program (RDP) 2014-2020 of the previous programming period has also been implementing a similar program regarding the "Empowerment of new farmers". With regard to Western Macedonia, in March 2018, the sub-measure 6.1 of the RDP was budgeted at €18.799 million and included 952 beneficiaries⁷¹. In November 2020, a preliminary 3rd call for sub-measure 6.1⁷² -with an initial budget of €30.5 million- was issued for the Regional Units of Kozani and Florina of the Region of Western Macedonia⁷³, aiming to mitigate the effects of the lignite phase-out in these areas.

The primary sector is a key pillar of the economy, also supported by the TJTP of Western Macedonia; therefore, it is important to exploit the potential of combining programs for young people who wish to work in the primary sector, while there are also training opportunities to empower new farmers. For instance, action 1.1.1 (*Training and skill development interventions for new farmers with small farms*) of sub-measure 6.3 (*Support for the development of small farms*) of the RDP 2014-2020, which is implemented by the Hellenic Agricultural Organization-DIMITRA (ELGO-DIMITRA), is of particular interest.

⁷⁰ Ministry of Environment and Energy, Press Release (04.05.2022), "Response to EU comments on the new CAP 2023-2027", <https://bit.ly/3wQYwgQ>

⁷¹ Region of Western Macedonia (2020), 2nd update of the decision to post the evaluation results for sub-measure 6.1 "Installation of new farmers" of the RDP 2014-2020, 12.03.2018, <https://bit.ly/3m02dfq>

⁷² Special Service for the Implementation of the Rural Development Program 2014-2020, Preliminary publication of the call for sub-measure 6.1, <https://bit.ly/3IYCjZj>

⁷³ Ministry of Rural Development and Food, Special Service for the Implementation of the Rural Development Program (2021), 3rd Call for the submission of applications for inclusion in sub-measure 6.1 "Installation of New Farmers" of Greece's Rural Development Program (RDP) during the transitional periods 2021 and 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Q4p3QX>

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This review of the course of the Just Transition in Greece to date -and especially in Western Macedonia- highlights the deafening absence of youth in the transition planning phase. Youth were not present in the consultations that were carried out for the formulation of the SDAM, TJTPs and the PDAM 2021-2027. What is more, this fact was reflected in the governance mechanism established by Law 4872/2021, entitled “*Just Development Transition, regulation of specific issues of the lignite phase-out and other urgent provisions*”; this will render taking ownership of the planning even more challenging for those who will be called upon to implement it in the coming years. However, these unfavorable circumstances can and must be reversed in the implementation and monitoring phases of the Just Transition.

Recommendations to National, Regional and Municipal Authorities

In order to ensure the effective participation of youth at all stages of the Just Transition, with a particular focus on its implementation and monitoring phases, the following recommendations are addressed to national, regional and municipal authorities. In particular:

1. Meetings should be set up for youth living, working and studying in Western Macedonia, in order to inform them regarding the training, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities included in both the TJTP and the other programs that will be developed in their region over the next period.
2. An institutional role of the youth should be established in the transition governance mechanism, especially in the partnership and the monitoring committees, as well as in any future planning review process.
3. The Independent Observatory Department, provided for by Law 4872/2021 on Just Transition to monitor adherence to the implementation timetable of SDAM objectives and recommendations and their fulfillment, should focus on data collection and keep a meticulous record of the transition’s social and economic impacts on the 15-29 age-group. To this end, youth drain should be added as an index of the success of the NSRF-DAM Programme objectives.
4. It is imperative to build a strategy so as to curb youth unemployment and the drain of young people from lignite areas; the implementation of this strategy could be financed by the interventions and measures of the current programming period.
5. The implementation of projects that can be directly carried through by youth should be given top priority. For instance, projects concerning youth training, employment and education should be immediately activated, while funds and former lignite lands should be reserved for the creation of an ecosystem of youth entrepreneurship.
6. Through their existing structures, as well as through the projects they will undertake in the next period, local authorities can serve as a hub for the involvement of young people in the implementation of the transition. In particular, local authorities should use their local councils, community centers, social services and development companies to accommodate youth groups; provide information on the transition and the opportunities it offers; set up workshops to exchange experiences with young people from other lignite regions in Europe; offer guidance to youth entering the labor market; provide training on writing proposals for funding; support youth entrepreneurial efforts, etc.
7. The University of Western Macedonia should have an active role in youth education and training overall, as well as in generating qualified scientists who can take advantage of

the employment and entrepreneurial opportunities emerging in the context of the Just Transition. In addition to catering to enrolled students, the University could provide educational programs of benefit to the Region's youth, even if the latter are not regular attendants. Furthermore, the University can serve as a hub for the local community as a whole, facilitating the exchange of experiences and knowledge with other educational institutions in the lignite regions of Europe. Finally, in collaboration with local companies, the University can also contribute to the training of new workers who need specialized knowledge and to the retraining of workers who retire from lignite activities and seek employment in other sectors.

8. Authorities can join forces with youth associations to set up a **Just Transition Fund for Youth** by existing national and EU resources, intended to support young people turn their initiatives and ideas into concrete projects through small-scale funding. This fund could be financed by part of the revenues from the auctioning of CO₂ emission allowances, as is the case with the national resources for the Just Transition made available by the Green Fund. This initiative would promote youth entrepreneurship and give young people the opportunity to have an impact on their region and actually influence the shift in the production and development model of the lignite areas. In fact, such a youth fund could also serve as a 'workshop', through which young people would learn how to manage their ideas and would acquire basic project management skills, which they could then apply to other, larger -national or even European- funds to support their entrepreneurial future.

What can Youth do?

As outlined in the previous section, authorities are called upon to take initiatives so as to bridge the gap in youth participation in the Just Transition; nonetheless, it is of paramount importance that youth themselves lay claim to an active participation in this process. In recent years, youth have been at the forefront of the public debate on environment, energy and climate policies, fighting for a sustainable future through youth climate councils, assemblies and spontaneous actions⁷⁴. Drawing from this international experience locally, young people in Western Macedonia could find ways to make their voices heard and take part in shaping policies and measures that affect them. In particular they can:

1. Meet, discuss and establish a **platform for dialogue, information and intervention** regarding the Just Transition.
2. Participate individually or collectively in processes related to the Just Transition, such as **public consultations**, information workshops, etc.
3. Establish **direct contact with local government**, in order to participate as any other regional stakeholder in the Just Transition, namely, on an equal footing with businesses, workers and civil society organizations.
4. **Make use of the programs and resources available** for education, training, employment and entrepreneurship, as well as benefit from EU and other initiatives.
5. Establish a **Youth Council for a Just Transition**: this Council could act as an umbrella for youth associations or individuals, with the aim of becoming an

⁷⁴ Climate councils or local climate assemblies are a form of citizens' organization on environmental and climate change issues. They are independent structures that aim to engage citizens, in a structured manner, in the public debate on environmental and climate policy. Similar structures are being set up by youth groups. Typical examples are the Danish Climate Assembly and Youth Climate Council and the Scottish Climate Assembly.

independent advisory committee to the authorities (be it local or national) involved in the Just Transition. Such a Council would empower local youth and strengthen active participation, while reinforcing cooperation among young people. At the same time, it could collect data on the transition, monitor the implementation of youth and transition policies and submit proposals for legislative initiatives, as well as policy recommendations, regarding the Just Transition.

