

Summary of Malgorzata's speech on the topic of Just Transition

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The term 'just transition' has entered the political mainstream and the idea is officially, and financially, supported by the European Union. Yet, a closer look on the former Socialist countries, which should be now undergoing or finalizing just transitions of their coal regions, reveals a number of challenges. In my speech, I will refer mainly to the examples of Polish coal regions as well as the region of Jiu Valley in Romania.

The post-Socialist countries have all undergone a rapid, shock-therapy-style transition from planned economy to a neoliberal free market, which included large-scale privatization and, to a large extent, leaving aside the ambitions of the state to control and/or co-create an industrial policy. It is still a dogma for most politicians in the region that 'the market must decide' and the best thing the state can do is to lower taxes for foreign investors. If we add to this the weakness of trade union structures (also a heritage of that transition), we realise that no one is actually able to guarantee the key part of any just transition process: preservation of workplaces (not to mention their quality).

While some of the regions analyzed, like the Romanian Jiu Valley, try to build a new regional economy and identity around such activities as tourism (including industrial tourism) and recreation and other related services, no one has reached levels of employment comparable to the times of the mining industry. In addition, given that the small and middle-sized businesses are more vulnerable to crises, does the small business-based transition even deserve a name of just transition? Or is it only an attempt on softening the worst effects of mine closures?

Another key problem encountered in just transition planning is the mistrust of local communities which often can hardly imagine a future without mines for their regions. Remembering well the factories' closures of the 90', post-Socialist societies are not eager to believe that industry could be swiftly replaced by services etc. There are tensions between green NGO-ses and trade unions, and fake news about European coal policy can be spread easily. Building up social capital and facilitating grassroots activities among people whose opinions were hardly ever taken into consideration is another challenge for just transition in the post-Socialist Europe, if it is to succeed.