

Editorial: Unfolding Just Green Transitions in the Western Balkan Region

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# EDITORIAL: UNFOLDING JUST GREEN TRANSITIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKAN REGION

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**Abstract.** Just Green Transitions (JGT) have become a central pillar of the European Union's response to climate change, seeking to reconcile its environmental ambition with social and spatial justice. While extensively debated within Member States, less attention has been paid to how this policy paradigm unfolds in candidate and neighbouring countries. This editorial introduces a thematic issue that critically examines the translation of JGT principles into governance arrangements, instruments and practices in the Western Balkan Region, a particularly fertile context in which to explore opportunities, tensions and limits. It situates the thematic issue within broader debates on Europeanisation, spatial justice, and sustainability transitions, outlining the conceptual framework and key challenges shaping JGT in the region. It argues that understanding how green transitions are negotiated under conditions of structural disadvantage and political fragmentation is essential to assessing whether Europe's green transition can also be just beyond the EU borders.

**Keywords:** Just Green Transitions, European Union, Western Balkan Region, European Green Deal, Europeanisation.

## Introduction

Achieving a transition toward environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient development constitutes an issue of justice, given that populations and regions in vulnerable circumstances are disproportionately exposed to the adverse impacts of climate change and environmental

degradation. Although the green transition is already underway and generating employment and economic opportunities, the scale of transformation required to mitigate climate change is also associated with employment displacement, livelihood disruptions, and losses in public and private revenues across numerous localities, often in areas that may not directly benefit from the transition. Moreover, the shift entails fundamental changes in energy and food systems and land-use practices, giving rise to additional social and environmental challenges, including energy poverty, increased pressures on smallholder farmers, and unequal access to green technologies and sustainable infrastructure. While overcoming carbon-intensive development lock-ins necessitates strong political commitment across governance levels, greening strategies that fail to account for the political economy of the transition and the socio-economic well-being of affected communities are likely to lack durability and political legitimacy. Against this backdrop, calls for Just Green Transitions (JGT) have gained increasing prominence in global, national, and subnational policy debates (Berisha et al., 2026a; Shaker & Berisha, 2025).

In the European Union (EU), this worldwide trend has led to the recent launch of the so-called Just Transition Mechanism (JTM), a key tool to ensure that the transition towards the climate-neutral economy promoted through the European Green Deal (EGD) does not leave any region or anyone behind. Whereas these JGT, and the JTM more in particular, explicitly concern the EU Member States, the EU candidate and neighbourhood countries are not immune to their influence, which is also activated by the continuous policy and funding channels that link them to the EU within the broader European integration process (Berisha et al., 2026b; Shaker, 2026). In particular, the countries of the Western Balkans have been the subject of a dedicated Green Agenda that contributed to influencing how the resources attributed through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance are delivered (Moodie et al., 2025). Be that as it may, their status of candidate and neighbouring countries means that they benefit of a lower amount of resources dedicated to the Green Transition than the full members (Berisha & Cotella, 2021). At the same time, they are excluded from the JTM support and its logic, hence running into the risk of disregarding the unwanted social consequences of the transition.

Acknowledging these challenges, the thematic issue introduced by this editorial aims to explore how the conceptual and policy paradigm underpinning the JGT is being translated into governance frames, instruments and practices in the countries of the Western Balkan Region. The next section will sketch out in more detail the inception and consolidation of JGT as a policy paradigm through which the EU attempts to go beyond global development agendas. Then, the focus of the editorial shifts to the Western Balkans situation, exploring how this policy paradigm been translated in the region and how the various countries have been struggling to keep the pace with the concepts and financial instruments that it entails. As explicitly stated, to shed light on this matter constitutes the main aim of this thematic issue, achieved through the presentation of cross-cutting comparative overviews and case studies from selected countries, that will at the same time reflect on how the EU, despite the absence of specific sovereignty or competence, manage to exert an influence on the decision and policy-making processes of its candidate and neighbouring countries (Berisha et al., 2025). The editorial is concluded by a detailed introduction of the articles composing the thematic issue, which serves as a roadmap for the interested readers.

## **Just Green Transitions. A European policy paradigm**

The imperatives of a Green Transition have been embedded in global environmental governance debates for several decades. As Pfister (2010) observes, concerns about the ecological conse-

quences of industrial modernity can be traced back to the post-war period, when accelerated economic growth, fossil fuel dependence, and technological optimism profoundly reshaped production and consumption patterns. Within this context, early environmental policies focused on pollution control and resource efficiency gradually evolved into broader climate governance frameworks addressing decarbonisation, low-carbon development, and long-term sustainability. In Europe, these concerns were progressively institutionalised through policy initiatives that positioned energy transition as a key lever for addressing climate change, notably with the adoption of the first Renewable Energy Directive in 2001, in alignment with the commitments undertaken under the Kyoto Protocol (Cotella et al., 2016). In contrast, the concept of Just Transition emerged from a different genealogy, rooted in labour movements, trade union struggles, and environmental justice debates of the 1970s. Initially centred on protecting workers and communities affected by industrial restructuring, particularly in carbon-intensive sectors, the notion of just transition foregrounded questions of employment security, social protection, and distributive fairness. Over time, it expanded beyond its labour-oriented origins to encompass broader socio-spatial and environmental justice concerns, highlighting how the costs and benefits of structural change are unevenly distributed across social groups and territories (Moesker & Pesch, 2022; Tavares, 2022).

While Green Transition and Just Transition developed along largely separate intellectual and policy trajectories for much of the twentieth century, their increasing convergence reflects a growing awareness that climate action cannot be socially neutral and that environmental sustainability and justice are deeply intertwined (Shaker & Berisha, 2025). At the European level, this convergence has unfolded gradually through a complex process of institutionalisation. A key milestone was the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, which committed EU Member States to pursue climate action in line with nationally defined development priorities while safeguarding workers and communities affected by decarbonisation. This dual commitment marked a significant step towards integrating social considerations into climate policy. The subsequent launch of the EGD in 2019 consolidated this trajectory into a comprehensive continental-scale reform agenda. Conceived simultaneously as a climate policy and a growth strategy, the EGD set out the objective of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030 and achieving climate neutrality by 2050, while explicitly pledging to leave no person or region behind (EC, 2019). In doing so, it elevated the coupling of environmental sustainability and social justice from a normative aspiration to a foundational policy principle (Puntillo et al., 2026).

It is important to stress that the assemblage of Green and Just Transition within the European policy framework goes beyond the mere juxtaposition of environmental and social objectives. As argued by Shaker and Berisha (2025), JGT have emerged as socially constructed, ideologically charged, and geopolitically contested phenomena. Rather than constituting a clearly delimited concept or a fixed policy blueprint, JGT function as a meta-concept that integrates environmental imperatives, justice claims, and transition processes within a multi-level governance setting. Their framing and implementation depend on the interaction between EU-level discourses, funding logics, and legal instruments on the one hand, and national traditions, sectoral policies, and territorial specificities on the other. In this sense, JGT are not merely technical or financial arrangements, but deeply political constructs shaped by competing values, interests, and power relations.<sup>1</sup> This European paradigm has developed in close dialogue with global sustainability frameworks, most notably the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 alongside the Paris Agreement. The SDGs established an unprec-

<sup>1</sup> Adams et al. (2011) propose a conceptualisation of the interaction of values and interests within the complex power dynamics that shape the EU development agenda.

edented global commitment to integrating environmental protection, social inclusion, and economic development (Berisha et al., 2022). However, while the SDGs provide a universal and largely non-binding framework, the EGD can be understood as a translation and extension of this agenda within a specific regional and institutional context (Puntillo et al., 2026). It seeks not only to align EU policies with the SDGs, but also to operationalise them through binding regulatory instruments, dedicated funding mechanisms, and territorially differentiated governance arrangements, extending the temporal horizon of sustainability policy well beyond 2030 (Filipović et al., 2022).

A central expression of this ambition is the already mentioned JTM, developed to provide targeted support to regions and sectors most affected by the transition towards a green economy (EC, 2019). The JTM represents a turning point in EU climate policy by embedding justice considerations directly into the financing of the green transition.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it introduced a robust governance framework centred on Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs) that require Member States to identify the territories most affected by decarbonisation and to define context-specific transition strategies aligned with local socio-economic conditions. In doing so, they institutionalise a place-based approach that recognises the profound territorial heterogeneity of the European continent. This governance model reflects broader processes of Europeanisation, whereby supranational discourses, regulatory frameworks, and financial incentives reshape domestic institutional architectures and policy practices (Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2025). At the same time, it preserves significant room for manoeuvre for national and regional authorities, who retain responsibility for designing and implementing transition pathways (Cotella & Dąbrowski, 2021). Consequently, the realisation of JGT entails continuous negotiation between supranational objectives and domestic institutional contexts, a process that reflects the inherently political nature of JGT.

The balance between supranational coordination and domestic discretion constitutes both a strength and a source of tension within the EU JGT paradigm. On the one hand, the EU provides overarching objectives, normative guidance, and substantial financial resources. On the other, the diversity of institutional capacities, governance traditions, and political priorities across Member States results in highly differentiated approaches to implementation (Berisha et al., 2021). Some countries and regions pursue transition pathways that exceed EU targets, while others adopt more cautious or incremental strategies shaped by domestic political considerations (Siddi, 2020). These variations are amplified by differences in territorial profiles, as some regions remain heavily dependent on coal and carbon-intensive industries, while others have already diversified towards renewable energy and low-carbon economic models. Financial instruments play a pivotal role in mediating these dynamics. The JTF, as the flagship component of the JTM, is designed to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of decarbonisation by supporting reskilling, job creation, and economic diversification in vulnerable regions. The integration of InvestEU and the public sector loan facility further expands the scope of intervention by leveraging private and public investments. This multi-pillar structure illustrates how the EU seeks to align market mechanisms with policy objectives, embedding justice considerations within investment decisions rather than treating them as ex post compensatory measures. However, as Shaker and Berisha (2025) highlight, reliance on financial incentives also raises critical questions about access, conditionality, and administrative capacity. Not all regions are equally equipped to design effective TJTPs or to attract and manage investment, which may risk reinforcing existing territorial inequalities.

<sup>2</sup> The JTM is articulated around three complementary pillars: a Just Transition Fund (JTF) providing grants; a private investment mobilisation scheme under InvestEU; and a public sector loan facility implemented in cooperation with the European Investment Bank (Berisha et al., 2025). Together, these instruments aim to support economic diversification, reskilling, and social cohesion in territories facing the most acute transition-related challenges.

These challenges are compounded by conceptual ambiguities surrounding the notion of JGT itself. As extensively discussed by [Shaker and Berisha \(2025\)](#), terminological inaccuracies and conceptual fragmentation characterise both academic and policy discourses, with multiple overlapping terms used interchangeably to describe phenomena that are either similar or only partially divergent. The lack of a commonly agreed definition of what constitutes ‘just’, ‘green’, and ‘transition’ complicates both the operationalisation and evaluation of policies. Without a shared conceptual framework, there is a risk that JGT remains rhetorical, and do not translate into substantive guideline for action, obscuring trade-offs and masking unequal outcomes. In this light, whereas it is hardly deniable that JGT have progressively consolidated as the main defining feature of the 2020s European policy landscape, they do not constitute a fixed endpoint but an evolving meta-concept, continuously reshaped through governance practices, institutional experimentation, and political contestation. Whether the EU can leverage this paradigm to foster genuinely inclusive and transformative sustainable futures will depend on its capacity to manage heterogeneity, clarify conceptual foundations, and reconcile coherence with diversity without sacrificing the core commitment to leaving no person or region behind.

## The Western Balkans. Lost in (Just Green) Transitions?

The Western Balkans hold a complex position in Europe’s evolving JGT landscape. Although none of the countries in the region are members of the EU, all are formally engaged (albeit at different stages and speeds) in accession processes that orient domestic reforms towards EU standards, policy objectives, instruments and governance practices (Table 1).<sup>3</sup> This long-standing yet unfinished trajectory of European integration places the region in a condition of ‘in-betweenness’, whereby EU norms and priorities exert a strong influence on national policy agendas, while access to the Union’s most consequential financial instruments and governance frameworks remains partial.

This intermediate status has profound implications for how JGT agendas are framed, funded, and implemented across the Western Balkans. The EU’s influence is exercised through accession conditionality, regulatory alignment with the *acquis communautaire*, policy guidance embedded in country progress reports and dedicated financial instruments (most notably the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance – IPA). Together, these mechanisms function as powerful catalysts of Europeanisation, shaping domestic priorities and reform pathways even in the absence of formal membership ([Berisha et al., 2025](#)). In the domain of climate and environmental policy, this influence has intensified in recent years, following the launch of the EGD and the subsequent articulation of a dedicated Green Agenda for the Western Balkans ([Moodie et al., 2025](#)). By committing the region to the core pillars of EU climate action – decarbonisation, circular economy, biodiversity protection, pollution reduction, and sustainable food systems – the Green Agenda explicitly extends the EU’s green transition paradigm beyond its borders while acknowledging the region’s specific developmental constraints. At the same time, the Western Balkans’ engagement with the EU’s green agenda remains fundamentally asymmetric. While EU Member States benefit from extensive financial support and a well-defined governance architecture under the JTM, Western Balkan countries are excluded from both the resources and the place-based logic that underpin

<sup>3</sup> According to the latest country progress reports, Montenegro is the most advanced in the negotiation process, followed by Albania, which is progressing rapidly (both countries aim for full membership by 2028). Negotiations with candidates such as Serbia and North Macedonia are moving slowly due to internal and external disputes. Bosnia and Herzegovina, a candidate country, is still working to meet reform benchmarks, while Kosovo, a potential candidate, continues to await recognition of its independence by Member States.

this framework (Cotella & Berisha, 2016; Berisha & Cotella, 2025). As a result, they are expected to pursue ambitious decarbonisation and environmental reforms without access to comparable instruments designed to mitigate social costs, support economic diversification, and address territorial vulnerabilities. This asymmetry raises questions about the feasibility of implementing genuinely JGT in a context characterised by constrained public finances, limited administrative capacity and significant socio-economic disparities.

**Table 1.** Western Balkans' countries in the EU integration process

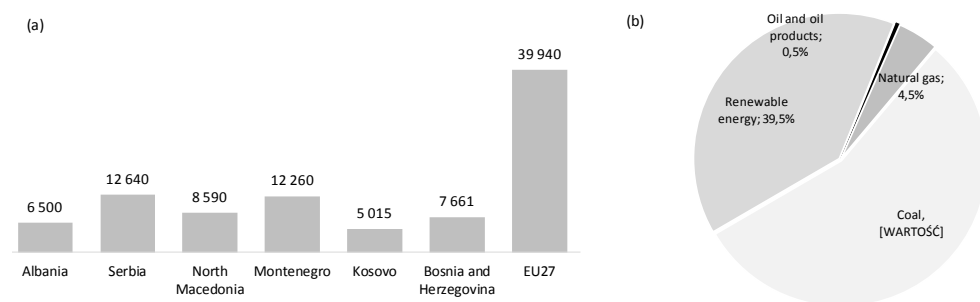
Country	Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA)	EU Candidate Status	Accession Negotiations	Key Green / JGT-Relevant Aspects (Cluster 4)
Albania	Signature 2006 Enforcement 2009	2014	Opened 2022	Some progress and some level of preparation; energy sector reform; air-quality and waste-management conditionalities under IPA III
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Signature 2008 Enforcement 2015	2022	Not yet opened	No progress on climate governance and an early level of preparation; fragmented institutional setup hampers just transition planning
Kosovo	Signature 2015 Enforcement 2016	Potential candidate	na	Limited progress and some level of preparation; high coal dependency and energy poverty raise JGT risks
Montenegro	Signature 2007 Enforcement 2010	2010	Opened 2012	Some progress in alignment with the EU climate acquis and a moderate to good level of preparation; coal phase-out debates highlight social impacts of affected communities
North Macedonia	Signature 2001 Enforcement 2004	2005	Opened 2022	Limited to some progress and moderate preparation; renewable energy expansion amid social equity challenges
Serbia	Signature 2008 Enforcement 2013	2012	Opened 2014	Some progress and a moderate to good level of preparation; fossil-fuel dependence; protests highlight the environmental and procedural justice dimensions of transition

Source: author's own elaboration on [EC \(2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e, 2025f\)](#).

Evidence from the 2025 EU Country Progress Reports shows how this 'in-between', asymmetric condition translates into differentiated, uneven transition pathways across the region. In some cases, notably Albania and Montenegro, externally driven and accession-conditional reforms have led to relatively advanced alignment with EU climate and energy *acquis*, particularly within the framework of IPA III and negotiations under Cluster 4. In others, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, progress remains limited and fragmented, reflecting both institutional weaknesses and complex political arrangements. Across the region, technical compliance with EU standards tends to advance more rapidly than the development of social, procedural, and distributive justice mechanisms, which are central to the JGT paradigm. This imbalance is increasingly visible in public debates and social mobilisations, including protests against environmentally harmful projects in Serbia and controversies surrounding coal phase-out strategies in Montenegro.

The heterogeneity of the region further complicates this picture, with Western Balkan countries featuring markedly different economic structures, energy systems, institutional capacities, and social vulnerabilities. GDP per capita levels across the region remain significantly below the EU average, limiting both fiscal space and domestic co-financing capacity for green investments. Even the most advanced economies in the region lag behind EU benchmarks, while others face persistent development gaps that shape their exposure to transition-related risks (OECD, 2024; World

Bank, 2025) (Fig. 1a). These disparities are mirrored in energy systems that remain heavily reliant on fossil fuels, particularly coal, for electricity generation. With the notable exceptions of Albania (where hydropower dominates the energy mix) and, to a lesser extent, Montenegro, coal and other fossil fuels continue to play a central role in ensuring energy security across the region (Bechev, 2023; Frey, 2024; Our World in Data, 2025) (Fig. 1b). This structural dependence translates into higher carbon intensity, greater vulnerability to external shocks such as volatile fossil fuel prices or energy supply disruptions, and heightened social risks associated with decarbonisation, including potential job losses in coal-dependent regions and rising energy costs for low-income households. As a consequence, energy poverty affects a considerable proportion of households, reflecting the interaction of low incomes, inefficient housing and exposure to energy prices (OECD, 2025a; Struga et al., 2025; Toska et al., 2025).<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1.** GDP per capita at current market prices in Euro, 2024 (a); and electricity generation by source for the WB countries, 2024 (b)

Source: authors' own elaboration on Eurostat (2025) for Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia and Montenegro; EC (2025b, 2025c) for BiH and Kosovo (year 2022) (a); Our World in Data (2025) (b).

According to the OECD's 2025 Economic Convergence Scoreboard, the region ranks at only 47% of EU performance in its greening cluster, with CO<sub>2</sub> intensity still roughly twice the EU average and ongoing structural dependence on coal for power generation (OECD, 2025b).<sup>5</sup> While some countries, such as Albania, show relatively strong results in specific indicators, others – most notably Kosovo and Serbia – display persistently low performance, reflecting structural dependence on carbon-intensive sectors and limited progress in emissions reduction. These aggregate figures mask important intra-regional differences, but they nevertheless underscore a broader pattern of delayed and uneven transition trajectories. From a justice perspective, these structural conditions matter. Regions and communities reliant on carbon-intensive industries or low-productivity sectors face disproportionate risks from decarbonisation, while labour markets often lack the resilience and active policy instruments needed for reskilling and economic diversification (OECD, 2025b; Vučković et al., 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Energy poverty constitutes a particularly acute challenge in this context. Low household incomes, inefficient housing stock, and exposure to volatile energy prices combine to place a significant share of the population at risk of energy deprivation. From a justice perspective, these conditions are critical, as they directly shape the distributive impacts of green transition policies. Measures aimed at reducing emissions or phasing out fossil fuels may disproportionately affect households and communities that already struggle to meet basic energy needs, unless accompanied by targeted social support and inclusive policy design.

<sup>5</sup> The greening cluster includes six indicators: two indicators assessing for accelerating decarbonisation (CO<sub>2</sub> emissions intensity and installed renewable power capacities) and four indicators on enhancing resource use (energy productivity, water productivity, waste intensity and municipal waste in landfills) (OECD, 2025b).

**Table 2.** Western Balkans' economies performance for the greening cluster relative to the EU average

	2014–2016	2017–2019	2023
EU average	100	100	100
Western Balkans average	58	53	47
Albania	97	94	103
Bosnia and Herzegovina	47	40	39
Kosovo	20	15	6
Montenegro	81	77	60
North Macedonia	57	54	45
Serbia	45	37	24

Source: [OECD \(2025b\)](#).

Political fragmentation further complicates the picture. The Western Balkans do not function as a unified macro-region in their dealings with the EU. Bilateral accession paths, unresolved political disagreements ([EC, 2025e, 2025f](#)), and differing foreign policy goals weaken the region's ability to present united positions and negotiate collectively on transition-related issues. Consequently, engagement with EU green and climate policies tends to be reactive and project-focused rather than strategic. This fragmented governance landscape also limits opportunities for cross-border cooperation and macro-regional initiatives that could help address shared environmental challenges and exploit economies of scale. While the EU has promoted transnational cooperation through various programmes, the absence of a unified regional voice and the uneven involvement of non-EU actors constrain the effectiveness of these efforts. In the context of JGT, this fragmentation undermines the potential for coordinated approaches to issues such as energy transition, biodiversity protection, and sustainable mobility, which inherently transcend national borders.

Several interrelated tensions arise from this context. First, there is a mismatch between the ambitious EU-driven green objectives and the limited administrative, financial, and social capacities of Western Balkan states. Second, green transition policies risk reproducing or exacerbating existing inequalities if justice considerations – such as employment impacts, affordability, and regional disparities – are regarded as secondary or are delayed. Third, reliance on external funding and conditionality may emphasise measurable environmental results over long-term social transformation and institutional learning. Lastly, the lack of robust, place-based governance frameworks, such as TJTPs, leaves many vulnerable regions without tailored transition pathways.

In this light, the question posed by the title of this section – i.e. whether the Western Balkans are 'lost' in Just Green Transitions – does not invite a simplistic affirmative or negative answer. Rather, the region can be understood as navigating JGT under conditions of structural disadvantage, political fragmentation, and partial inclusion within the EU's policy and funding architecture. These constraints do not preclude meaningful progress, but they significantly shape the forms it can take and the risks it entails. Understanding how JGT principles are translated, contested, and adapted within this context is therefore essential to assessing the broader viability of Europe's green transition agenda beyond the Union's borders. As further elaborated in the section below, this thematic issue takes up this challenge by examining how JGT principles travel, mutate, and are contested across Western Balkan contexts, shedding light on both the transformative potential and the limits of EU-driven transition paradigms beyond the Union's borders.

## Aim and rationale of the thematic issue

Against the background outlined above, this thematic issue is driven by the overarching aim of critically examining how the notion of JGT is interpreted, mobilised, and operationalised in the Western Balkan Region. The countries of the Western Balkans constitute a particularly revealing laboratory in this respect, as they are simultaneously exposed to the EU's green transition agenda and excluded from some of its most consequential mechanisms (most notably the JTM). This ambiguous position raises fundamental questions about the feasibility, coherence, and social implications of pursuing green transitions under conditions of partial integration and constrained resources. In this context, the editors aim to contribute to the growing body of literature on JGT by shifting analytical attention from formal EU Member States to a region deeply embedded in Europeanisation processes, yet institutionally and politically 'in-between' (Berisha et al., 2025). In doing so, they move beyond normative accounts of what JGT should look like and instead interrogate how environmental justice considerations are actually embedded (or sidelined?) in policy discourses, governance arrangements, instruments and implementation practices. At the same time, they acknowledge that the Western Balkans are not merely passive recipients of EU-driven agendas; rather, they represent contested spaces in which global sustainability narratives, European policy frameworks, national reform trajectories, and local socio-economic realities intersect in complex and often contradictory ways. Understanding these interactions is essential to assessing whether the promise of leaving no one and no region behind can be meaningfully upheld beyond the Union's borders.

More specifically, the thematic issue addresses a set of interrelated research questions that cut across scales, sectors and governance levels. Among others:

- How are JGT principles translated into national and subnational discourses in Western Balkan countries, and to what extent do they resonate with domestic policy priorities and societal concerns?
- What governance arrangements, institutional capacities, and planning instruments shape the implementation of green transition measures, and how do these differ across countries and territories within the region?
- To what extent are social, spatial, and distributive justice considerations integrated into sectoral policies such as energy, transport, housing, and spatial planning, and where do significant gaps persist?
- How do local communities, households, and users perceive and experience the green transition, and what forms of acceptance, resistance, or adaptation emerge at the grassroots level?
- Finally, how does the EU exert influence on these processes despite the absence of direct competences, and what are the limits and unintended consequences of this form of external governance?

Addressing these questions requires an explicitly multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approach. JGT cannot be adequately understood through a single analytical lens, as they simultaneously involve environmental objectives, economic restructuring, social redistribution, spatial reconfiguration, and political negotiation. Accordingly, the rationale of this thematic issue rests on the conviction that meaningful insights emerge only when macro-level policy frameworks are examined alongside meso-level governance arrangements and micro-level social practices. This implies combining perspectives from spatial planning, regional development, political economy, environmental governance, transport studies, and social research, while paying close attention to territorial specificities and lived experiences.

A central element of the rationale concerns the spatial and territorial dimensions of JGT. Much of the existing literature has highlighted that transition processes are inherently uneven, producing differentiated impacts across regions, cities, and neighbourhoods. In the Western Balkans, these spatial inequalities are particularly pronounced, reflecting long-standing developmental disparities, post-socialist restructuring trajectories, and the legacies of conflict and political fragmentation. Green transition policies that are designed without sensitivity to these territorial differences risk exacerbating existing divides, reinforcing peripheralisation, or generating new forms of exclusion. By foregrounding place-based perspectives, the contributions collected in this thematic issue seeks to explore how spatial planning, territorial governance, and local development strategies can either mitigate or amplify the distributive effects of green transitions. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, this thematic issue aims to bridge the gap between policy ambitions and everyday realities. While national strategies and action plans may adopt the language of sustainability and justice, their translation into concrete measures often encounters practical constraints related to affordability, infrastructure availability, administrative capacity, and social acceptance. Local perceptions of fairness, trust in public institutions, and cultural attitudes towards environmental practices can significantly shape the uptake and effectiveness of green policies, highlighting the need for participatory approaches and community engagement in transition planning. As various authors that have engaged in this endeavour explicitly argue, the success of green transitions ultimately depends on the choices and behaviours of individuals, households, and firms, whether in relation to mobility, energy consumption, housing renovation, or land use (Valkenburg & Cotella, 2016; Valkenburg, 2026).

The rationale for assembling a diverse set of contributions also lies in the comparative potential of the Western Balkan context. Despite sharing common challenges related to EU accession, economic development, and environmental performance, countries in the region display significant variation in institutional arrangements, policy progress, and societal responses. Exploring these differences enables a more differentiated assessment of how JGTs unfold under varying conditions of governance capacity, political commitment, and socio-economic structure. Such comparative insights are not only relevant for the Western Balkans themselves but also offer broader lessons for other neighbouring regions and candidate countries exposed to EU policy influence (see Katcharava, 2025). Finally, this thematic issue is motivated by a broader conceptual ambition: to contribute to ongoing debates about the nature of JGT as a policy paradigm and governance experiment. By examining how this paradigm travels beyond the EU, is reinterpreted across diverse contexts, and interacts with existing institutional and territorial realities, the thematic issue seeks to shed light on both its transformative potential and its limitations. In doing so, it aims to inform scholarly discussions on Europeanisation, sustainability transitions, and spatial justice, while also providing empirically grounded insights relevant to policymakers, practitioners, and civil society actors engaged in shaping the future of the Western Balkan region.

## **A roadmap for the reader**

After this editorial, the contribution by [Moodie et al.\(2025\)](#) opens the thematic issue by focusing on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans as an emerging framework of transnational cooperation. By interpreting the development and implementation of the Green Agenda through the lens of experimentalist macro-regional governance, the authors assess the extent to which its core principles are reflected in practice. Their analysis highlights how this governance logic

contributes to greater policy coherence among Western Balkan countries and lays the groundwork for future macro-regional strategy building in the region. After that, the contribution authored by [Cotella et al. \(2025\)](#) explores in more detail how the EU Just Green Transition policy framework is reshaping spatial planning and territorial governance in the Western Balkans. Through a comparative analysis of the situation in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, the paper shows that while just transition narratives are increasingly embedded in climate and energy strategies, their translation into spatial planning remains fragmented. The authors point to persistent institutional and coordination gaps, as well as limited adoption of place-based and spatial justice approaches, and call for clearer legal mandates and stronger participatory mechanisms to support equitable green transformations aligned with the European integration agenda. A third comparative contribution, authored by [Karafili et al. \(2025\)](#), shifts the focus to the transport sector by examining consumer perceptions, preferences and readiness for electric mobility across several Western Balkan countries. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach combining interviews and survey data, the paper highlights low levels of awareness and knowledge about electric mobility, alongside generally positive attitudes towards it. Costs, limited infrastructure, and a lack of confidence emerge as key barriers, underscoring the crucial role of public authorities in fostering trust through incentives, regulatory adjustments, and investments in accessible charging infrastructure.

The thematic issue turns then to country-specific perspectives, with the paper by [Dhrami et al. \(2025\)](#) that brings the discussion to the neighbourhood scale, investigating how a just green transition can be implemented in residential areas through a case study of Tirana. Using an ex-ante, scenario-based approach, the authors compare alternative development pathways for prefabricated housing stock up to 2040. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the study assesses costs, benefits and co-benefits of different transition options, providing policy-relevant evidence to inform long-term renovation strategies in Western Balkan cities in line with the Green Agenda. Closely related to this contribution, [Toska et al. \(2025\)](#) examine community perspectives on the green transition in Albania through a socio-economic survey of households and businesses located in prefabricated buildings in Tirana. The paper explores levels of awareness, attitudes and willingness to invest in energy-efficient solutions, shedding light on the socio-economic dynamics that shape public acceptance and readiness for green transition measures. The findings emphasise the importance of understanding local perceptions to support a socially inclusive and resilient transition process. The contribution by [Nikolov et al. \(2025\)](#) focuses on the just green transition process in North Macedonia, critically assessing the extent to which current policies adopt a place-based governance approach. Based on targeted survey data, the authors show that green transition policies remain largely top-down, with weak local participation and limited decentralisation. The paper argues that this governance configuration undermines spatial and social justice and calls for more detailed analyses and reforms to strengthen local capacities and place-based decision-making.

Then three papers focusing on the Serbian context are presented. [Vračarević et al. \(2025\)](#) address the role of public transport in enabling a just green transition through a case study of Kragujevac, Serbia. By analysing user satisfaction and perceptions regarding the potential introduction of electric buses, the paper shows strong public acceptance of cleaner transport technologies, albeit conditional on improvements in service quality. The findings stress the need for integrated transition strategies that combine technological innovation with social equity and enhanced service provision in mid-sized, post-socialist urban contexts. The contribution by [Stefanović \(2025\)](#) highlights the importance of green public spaces in residential areas as a key component of quality of life, drawing on examples from socialist and post-socialist housing in Novi Sad. By comparing

different spatial concepts and planning paradigms, the paper illustrates how varying allocations of green public space affect social interaction, health and well-being. The analysis offers valuable insights for future residential development, particularly in the context of investor-led urban growth and the need to reintegrate green infrastructure into everyday living environments. The third paper by [Nenković-Riznić and Maksin \(2025\)](#) focus on biodiversity and infrastructure planning by presenting a methodological approach for identifying ecological corridors for large carnivores in Serbia. Drawing on the case of Đerdap National Park and the ConnectGREEN project, the paper demonstrates how ecological connectivity can be systematically integrated into spatial and transport planning. The results provide strategic recommendations that align infrastructure development with the objectives of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.

The last two contributions once again open up the focus of the analysis and extend it beyond the Western Balkan countries. The paper by [Radaković and Berisha \(2025\)](#) examines the role of actors in cross-border and transnational cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian Region. Through actor-network analysis of environmental projects funded under EU programmes in the 2014–2020 period, the authors show how regional authorities act as key leaders and brokers within cooperation networks. At the same time, the limited involvement of smaller non-EU actors underscores untapped potential to strengthen regional resilience and improve collective responses to environmental challenges. Finally, the thematic issue closes with Katcharava's contribution, which broadens the perspective beyond the Western Balkans to the Eastern Partnership countries ([Katcharava, 2025](#)). By comparing the Western Balkan experience with green transition initiatives in the Eastern Partnership, the paper draws lessons on how to build wider partnerships based on shared responsibilities beyond the EU's borders. The analysis offers timely reflections on the external dimension of the EGD and its relevance for fostering sustainable transformations in neighbouring regions.

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