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JUST GREEN TRANSITIONS RESHAPING SPATIAL PLANNING FRAMEWORKS. EVIDENCE FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

Giancarlo Cotella¹ , Anila Bejko² , Erblin Berisha¹ , Marjan Nikolov³ , Vladimir Popovic⁴ ,
Zora Živanović⁴ 

¹ Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST), Politecnico di Torino
39 Viale Mattioli, 10125 Turin: Italy
giancarlo.cotella@polito.it • erblin.berisha@polito.it

² Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development
Polis University, Department of Urban Planning and Environment
Rruga Bylis 12, Autostrada Tiranë-Durrës Km 5, 1051 Tirana: Albania
anila_gjika@co-plan.org

³ Center for Economic Analyses
Bul. Jane Sandanski 63/3; 1000 Skopje: North Macedonia
info@cea.org

⁴ Faculty of Geography, University of Belgrade
Studentski trg 3/III, 11000 Belgrade: Serbia
vladimir.popovic@gef.bg.ac.rs • zora.zivanovic@gef.bg.ac.rs

Abstract. The Western Balkans faces unique challenges in pursuing of sustainable development, and to frame the actions put in place to face these challenges within the recent EU policy agenda is of utmost importance. Aiming at shedding light on the matter, this contribution examines the role of the EU Just Green Transitions policy framework in reshaping spatial planning in the Western Balkans, a region marked by complex post-socialist legacies and geopolitical aspirations towards EU integration. Through a comparative analysis of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, this study examines how domestic spatial governance frameworks and planning systems have adapted their instruments, policies, and institutional structures in response to EU-driven discourses. The collected evidence shows that, while Just Green Transitions narratives are increasingly present in climate and energy strategies, their integration into spatial planning remains fragmented, constrained by limited multilevel coordination and institutional capacity; planning instruments continue to reflect outdated paradigms, and the inclusion of a place-based approach to spatial justice remains minimal. This highlights the need for clearer legal mandates and the introduction of participatory mechanisms to ensure that spatial planning supports equitable and context-sensitive green transformations in the Western Balkans, while contributing to the broader European integration agenda.

Keywords: spatial governance, planning systems, Just Green Transitions, European Union, Europeanisation, Western Balkans.

Introduction

The European Union's (EU) commitment to climate neutrality by 2050, articulated through the European Green Deal (CEC, 2019), has set in motion a far-reaching transformation of policy priorities, governance arrangements and territorial development logics. At the core of this transformation lies the concepts of 'Green and Just Transition' – an agenda that seeks to reconcile environmental sustainability with social equity and territorial cohesion¹. While the European Green Deal initially targeted EU Member States, its influence has progressively extended beyond the Union's borders, impacting candidate and potential candidate countries through the Europeanisation of legal frameworks, institutional structures, and planning paradigms (Berisha & Cotella, 2021, 2024). Among these, the Western Balkans represent a particularly compelling region of inquiry. Geopolitically situated at the Union's periphery yet institutionally oriented toward accession, these countries are not only adapting to the environmental and economic implications of the green transition but also navigating the complex demands of aligning with EU values and standards without full membership benefits (Berisha et al., 2021a).

The Western Balkans face intertwined challenges of post-socialist transformation, socio-economic fragmentation and institutional fragility (Berisha et al., 2018, 2025a). As the region grapples with the imperative of decarbonisation, biodiversity protection, and circular economy development, it must simultaneously contend with deep-rooted structural inequalities, underdeveloped administrative capacities, and contested statehood in some cases. In this context, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (CEC, 2020), adopted in 2020 through the Sofia Declaration, constitutes both a symbolic commitment and a pragmatic roadmap to integrate EU climate objectives with regional development strategies (Berisha, 2025). Importantly, the document elevates spatial planning as crucial instruments for achieving Just Green Transitions². However, despite this policy momentum, most analyses continue to focus on sectoral policies – particularly energy, transport and agriculture – or on the alignment with EU environmental regulations (Csalódi et al., 2022; Mathiesen et al., 2023), and relatively little attention has been paid to how spatial planning frameworks and instruments are reshaped as a consequence of the transformative agenda promoted by the EU.

The contribution addresses this research gap by examining how the discourses, tools, and regulatory imperatives associated with the Just Green Transitions are influencing spatial planning systems in three Western Balkan countries: Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. It explores the degree to which these countries are engaging with the emerging narratives, adapting their spatial planning instruments and revising legal and institutional frameworks to support environmentally and socially sustainable development. In doing so, the contribution also sheds light on the implications of these dynamics of change for the broader process of Europeanisation in non-member states operating under conditions of asymmetrical power and institutional dependency (see also Adams et al., 2011; Berisha et al., 2025b).

The analysis is structured as follows. The next section provides a conceptual overview of the EU's Just Green Transition framework, outlining its discursive foundations, governance architecture, and relevance for spatial planning. Particular attention is paid to the mechanisms of Europeanisation and their differentiated effects on Member States and candidate countries. The research methodology is sketched out, to then present the country-specific analyses for Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, respectively. For each country the contribution traces the influence of Just Green Transitions on national narratives, spatial planning instruments and legal and institutional frameworks.

¹ More information in JRC (2025).

² Whereas the EU jargon mainly argues for a green and just transition, throughout the paper we follow the pluralistic interpretation recently brought forward by Shaker and Berisha (2025), that unfolds the multiple conceptual and terminological complexities surrounding the concept – hence adopting the plural wording 'Just Green Transitions.'

The findings are then drawn together in a comparative discussion, identifying common trends, divergences, and emerging challenges across the cases. A concluding section rounds off the contribution, reflecting on the implications of the study and suggesting future directions of investigation.

EU Just Green Transitions and its implications for domestic spatial planning systems

Whereas the imperatives of a Green Transition have been discussed in climate governance debates since the 1950s (Pfister, 2010), the concept of Just Transition emerged from labour and environmental justice debates in the 1970s, contributing to increasingly shaping climate and energy policy, foregrounding concerns of socio-spatial and environmental justice (Moesker & Pesch, 2022; Tavares, 2022). At the European level, these policy concepts have progressively been institutionalised through a sequence of policy initiatives whose origin dates back to the edge of the millennium with the approval of the first Renewable Energy Directive in 2001, that elected energy transition as a pivotal tool against climate change in the context of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol (Cotella et al., 2016). They have further gained momentum following the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, when the EU Member States committed to pursue climate action in line with nationally defined development priorities while safeguarding workers and communities affected by decarbonisation. With the approval of the European Green Deal in 2019, a continental-scale economic reform agenda was established, centred on achieving climate neutrality while ‘leaving no person or region behind’ (CEC, 2019), consolidating the role of the EU as a key driver in steering environmental and climate action (Burns et al., 2020; Knill & Liefferink, 2021).

This complex trajectory, embodied primarily in the European Green Deal and its operational tools such as the Just Transition Mechanism, may bear implications for territorial governance and spatial planning across Member States. In fact, while the EU lacks formal competence in spatial planning, the interaction between supranational discourses, financial incentives, and regulatory requirements has profoundly reshaped domestic institutional architectures and policy frameworks, through processes widely referred to the realm of Europeanisation³ (Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2025). As some authors recently argued Just Green Transitions have incrementally become an integral part of this framework (Shaker & Berisha, 2025), as a consequence of the strategic aim of coupling environmental sustainability with social justice, ensuring that no people or places are left behind in the path toward a climate-neutral continent. This dual goal is not merely technical or financial, but highly political. As argued by Shaker and Berisha (2025), Just Green Transitions are socially constructed, ideologically charged, and geopolitically contested phenomena. Their framing and implementation depend on a complex multi-level governance setting where EU-level discourse, funding logics, and legal instruments interact with national traditions, sectoral policies, and territorial particularities. Thus, understanding the implications of the EU Just Green Transitions framework for domestic spatial planning requires a critical reading of how this supranational agenda is filtered, translated, and appropriated within diverse planning cultures and institutional ecosystems (Cotella, 2018).⁴

³ In turn, these processes reflects the EU’s growing meta-governance role in shaping the normative, procedural, and spatial conditions for delivering its policies in the member states.

⁴ It is important to acknowledge that various authors have put into question the actual impact of Just Green Transitions policies, e.g. in relation to brownfields redevelopment as well as on the spatial planning instruments in place in the regions targeted by JTTPs (see for instance Drobnik (2023) in relation to the Polish coal regions).

The Just Green Transitions Framework and its contribution to a Europeanisation of Spatial Planning

The Europeanisation of spatial planning refers to the processes by which EU-level ideas, norms, and instruments penetrate domestic planning systems, reshaping their objectives, tools, and actor configurations (Faludi, 2014; Cotella, 2020; Purkarthofer, 2024). Cotella and Janin Rivolin (2025) conceptualise this as a multi-dimensional influence, encompassing structural, instrumental, and discursive mechanisms. Structurally, EU regulations – particularly in sectoral domains – have triggered legal reforms and institutional adaptations in Member States. For example, directives on environmental impact assessments or Natura 2000 protection zones have often led to the creation of new administrative authorities, shifts in planning competences, or the integration of new procedures within existing spatial plans. Instrumentally, the EU exerts influence through conditional funding mechanisms, such as those embedded in Cohesion Policy, the European Regional Development Fund, and more recently, the Just Transition Fund, that incentivize certain planning behaviours and strategic alignments across a range of planning systems (Cotella & Dąbrowski, 2023). Discursively, the EU shapes the expectations, language, and policy imaginaries of domestic actors through the propagation of soft concepts – resilience, sustainability, smart specialisation, or more recently, just green transitions. These notions are embedded in strategic documents (e.g., *Territorial Agenda 2030*), flagship initiatives (e.g., Mission Adaptation), and guidance documents, forming what Böhme (2002) calls a process of ‘discursive integration’ (Adams et al., 2011, 2014; Cotella et al., 2012).⁵

The EU’s Just Green Transitions agenda is articulated through a compound of policy instruments, discursive framings, and institutional innovations. Central to this agenda is the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) that, through various funding tools, supports carbon-intensive regions in their transition, while addressing the socio-economic consequences of decarbonisation (Filipović et al., 2022; Crespy & Munta, 2023). Importantly, access to these funds is conditional upon the preparation of Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTJs), jointly developed by national and/or regional authorities in dialogue with the European Commission⁶. In this light, the EU’s approach to Just Green Transitions relies heavily on a multi-level meta-governance model that recognises the need for vertical coordination (between EU institutions, national governments, and regional authorities) and horizontal integration (across policy domains and sectors), in so doing potentially having implications for spatial planning, among which:

- It repositions planning as a key tool for coordinating environmental, economic, and social policies at the territorial level.⁷
- It challenges planning systems to confront new governance demands, turning multi-level coordination, stakeholder participation and adaptive planning from normative ideals to operational requirements tied to funding and compliance.
- It compels planning systems to engage with the politics of distribution, in so doing calling for new tools to assess spatial and social justice and to monitor territorial outcomes.

⁵ However, these discourses are neither universally accepted nor uniformly interpreted. Instead, they are subject to translation, resistance, and reinterpretation within national planning cultures, depending on factors such as administrative traditions, political economies, and planning legacies.

⁶ Various governance models – centralised, regionalised and hybrid – have been identified among EU countries, concerning the implementation of the JTM and the development of TJTJs (Berisha et al., 2025b; Puntillo et al., 2026).

⁷ In many cases, the requirement to produce TJTJs has revitalised strategic planning practices, prompted inter-municipal cooperation, and fostered a more integrated approach to territorial development. For example, in regions eligible for the JTF, spatial planners are increasingly involved in assessing socio-ecological vulnerabilities, mapping transition risks, and designing place-based responses (Fünfgeld & Schmid, 2020).

- It introduces new epistemic and normative challenges, as concepts such as ‘just transitions’ and ‘resilience’ demand reinterpretation within national policy cultures and require spatial planners to engage with ethical questions (e.g. who defines what is just, whose voices are included or excluded, etc.).

Yet, as argued by [Shaker and Berisha \(2025\)](#), the notion of a Just Green Transitions suffers from terminological ambiguity, conceptual fragmentation, and inconsistent operationalisation across Member States. While some countries (e.g., Sweden) have embraced the Just Green Transitions framework as an opportunity for inclusive environmental governance ([Moodie et al., 2021](#)), others (e.g., Poland) approach it more pragmatically, often framing it as a regulatory constraint or a source of external funding with minimal domestic ownership ([Kozłowska-Woszczycka et al., 2025](#)). Asymmetries in institutional capacity, knowledge and political will constitute further burdens hampering implementation, and the procedural logic of ‘leaving no one behind’ can be undermined by uneven power relations, fragmented planning competencies, and technocratic standardisation ([Sarkki et al., 2022](#)). Due to these issues, whereas one may concur that the operationalisation of Just Green Transitions may induce change in domestic spatial planning systems, the extent and direction of this change is something worth studying.

What implications for the Western Balkans?

As already argued by various authors, the influence of Europeanisation is not limited within the borders of the EU but extends to the surrounding regions that aspire to join or to cooperate with it ([Schimmelfenning, 2010](#); [Adams et al., 2011](#); [Berisha et al., 2025a](#)). However, its nature and mechanisms differ significantly between EU member states and candidate countries, such as those in the Western Balkans Region, with the latter expected to align with EU norms without having a say in their formulation ([Sedelmeier 2011](#)). For countries in the accession process, the pressure to adapt is highly dependent on the timeline and perceived urgency of integration, which creates sustained institutional strain as they prepare for eventual membership. This transformative pressure manifests most clearly across three interrelated domestic spheres:

- **Institutional Adaptation:** Europeanisation can prompt institutional restructuring, either through the voluntary commitment of national actors or through externally driven reform agendas. [Vachudova \(2005\)](#) notes that this transformation is often ‘passive’, in the sense that change hinges on domestic political will to accommodate international expectations. This often leads to the creation or reconfiguration of ministries, agencies, or administrative bodies to manage specific policy domains aligned with EU requirements.
- **Policy Reform:** The transposition of EU law into national frameworks represents a central pillar of Europeanisation. Such reforms may touch on the substance, instruments, and narratives of policymaking ([Börzel & Risse, 2000](#)), ranging from procurement standards to energy regulations and environmental protection. These adjustments may involve both adopting EU-style procedures and embedding new governance tools into existing institutional arrangements.
- **Political Change:** Europeanisation can also reshape national political landscapes by influencing how societal interests are expressed, organised, and represented. The restructuring of power dynamics among key political actors may either accelerate or impede compliance with EU expectations ([Börzel & Risse, 2000](#)), depending on the prevailing balance of domestic interests and the broader political climate.

The extent to which candidate countries internalise EU norms and practices hinges on their historical trajectories and institutional capacities. The degree of compliance and reform tends to reflect each country's ability to absorb and operationalise external mandates (Gidişoğlu, 2007). However, this process is not neutral: the EU retains considerable asymmetrical power, often applying a combination of incentives and conditionalities – what has been termed the 'sticks and carrots' approach – based on the political priorities of the European Commission (Guillén et al., 2022).

Although numerous variables shape the Europeanisation process, domestic transformation remains one of the most contested and uneven aspects (Radaelli, 2004). Typically, reforms are path-dependent, but exogenous factors – such as geopolitical events or unresolved statehood issues – can alter the trajectory of integration (Berisha & Cotella, 2024). In the Western Balkans, for example, Europeanisation has not only been a vehicle for alignment with EU standards but also a geopolitical instrument for promoting peace and stability. These differentiated dynamics inevitably shape how Europeanisation influences spatial planning systems in the region. The Western Balkans offer a distinct perspective on how planning reforms are mediated through EU-driven conditionalities, but also how broader political and territorial questions intersect with the Europeanisation agenda. As such, this region provides critical insights into the interplay between external governance frameworks and domestic policy evolution under conditions of post-conflict reconstruction, fragmented sovereignty, and contested identities.

How are Western Balkans' spatial governance and planning systems changing to favour Just Green Transitions?

Spatial governance and planning systems in the Western Balkans are embedded within complex socio-political and institutional contexts, shaped by post-socialist legacies, state-building trajectories, and the overarching influence of Europeanisation processes (Berisha et al., 2018, 2024). While the region's countries have formally committed to the principles of sustainable development and the EU Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, their spatial governance and planning systems remain marked by fragmented institutional arrangements, uneven legal frameworks, and limited capacity for multilevel coordination. Consequently, the intersection between Just Green Transitions and domestic spatial planning presents both opportunities and challenges: on one hand, it offers a normative and financial framework for aligning territorial development with climate and sustainability objectives; on the other, it exposes tensions within governance structures that are often centralised, under-resourced, and insufficiently participatory.

Acknowledging the relevance of this nexus, the following subsections explore how the spatial governance and planning systems in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia have been adapting because of the Just Green Transitions narratives and policies. To do this, we adopt a qualitative, comparative methodology that combines targeted literature review with structured policy analysis across the three national contexts. The empirical work draws on recent planning laws, national and subnational development strategies, sectoral policies, and EU-aligned climate instruments, supported by grey literature and expert assessments. This approach enables the identification of discursive shifts, legal reforms, and planning innovations that may signal the embedding – or lack thereof – of Just Green Transitions principles in domestic spatial governance and planning.

Whenever possible, strategic documents and spatial planning documents were analysed separately, to allow for a more nuanced understanding of the occurred influences in the rhet-

orics and discourses vs the instruments and practices that actually shape development paths. At the same time, our work also dedicates attention to highlighting the limitations, tensions, and inconsistencies that continue to undermine coherent and equitable transition strategies. More in particular, the following analytical aspects were dedicated attention to, and then used in the discussion as comparative keys: (i) Integration of Just Green Transition into formal planning frameworks; (ii) Influence on strategic spatial development discourse; (iii) rhetoric alignment vs operationalisation; (iv) spatial and social justice; (v) key governance conditions shaping uptake.

Albania

The European Green Deal and its extension via the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans – endorsed through the Sofia Declaration of 2021 – have increasingly shaped policy discourse in Albania, both in sectoral terms and in the spatial governance domain (Bregu, 2024). While the country has only partially embraced the Just Green Transitions rhetoric, linking sustainable development objectives with social equity in its planning narratives, its commitment to decarbonisation and net-zero approaches has been extensive and increasingly institutionalized.

Since 2018, several legal and strategic frameworks have been adopted to promote the green transition across five priority pillars: (i) decarbonisation encompassing climate, energy, and transport; (ii) depollution of air, water, and soil; (iii) circular economy; (iv) rural development and sustainable agriculture; and (v) biodiversity and nature conservation (Regional Cooperation Council, 2021). For instance, Albania's National Strategy for Climate Change and its accompanying Action Plan for 2020–2030 were formulated 'to support the implementation of EU legislation on environment and climate' through cross-sectoral coordination. Complementing this are national legislative updates, such as Law No. 155/2020 'On Climate Change' (Official Gazette of Albania, 2020), which sets out a basic framework for emissions reduction, adaptation, and monitoring obligations, alongside the updated National Strategy on Climate Change and Action Plans (NECP), approved in April 2024, which targets a 42% renewable energy share and climate neutrality by 2050 (Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy, 2024). Likewise, the country's EU candidacy has served as a driving force in the reform of the environmental sector and cross-sectoral coordination on climate matters.

In parallel, Albania has made progress in resilience planning and disaster risk reduction, aligning its legislation with the Sendai Framework and implementing it across national and municipal levels. More recently, the country has strengthened its energy efficiency framework through a newly drafted Law on the Energy Performance of Buildings and a Long-Term Renovation Strategy, which is currently under development. Additional legal instruments address depollution, the circular economy, biodiversity conservation, waste management, and sustainable transport.

Translating rhetoric into place-based action

Despite this evolving policy landscape, Albania continues to face a twofold challenge: first, translating the alignment of discourse into concrete planning instruments and implementation mechanisms (including financial support) and, second, ensuring that spatial planning becomes truly cohesive in this green transition. Albania's planning narrative began a paradigmatic shift in 2009 with the adoption of a new Law on Territorial Planning, followed by the more comprehensive 2014 Law on Territorial Planning and Development. These legislative changes reflect the broader Europeanisation of Albania's planning system (Berisha et al., 2024). However, there is limited evidence that the national spatial planning framework has substantially evolved over the past decade to meaningfully integrate Just Green Transitions themes (Aliaj et al., 2024).

At the apex of Albania's spatial planning hierarchy is the General National Territorial Plan (GNTP) 'Albania 2030', setting a 15-year vision for sustainable spatial development. This plan explicitly incorporates European policy references and aligns its goals with EU directives on environmental protection and climate change (Aliaj et al., 2024). However, since it was developed before Albania's formal commitment to the European Green Deal and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, its treatment of environmental concerns is partial and does not reflect a holistic vision of net-zero emissions or comprehensive decarbonization strategies. In parallel, several Integrated Cross-Sectoral Plans (e.g., for the coastal zone and the Tirana-Durrës metropolitan area) were developed in 2016–2018 to address climate adaptation, disaster risk, and sustainable tourism in key regions. These plans embed environmental safeguards – such as coastal erosion control and disaster resilience standards – within broader territorial development frameworks, demonstrating the growing influence of green transition priorities on sectoral planning (Allkja, 2018). At the local level, under the 2014 Territorial Administrative Reform, all 61 municipalities were required to develop General Local Territorial Plans (GLTPs) that must be consistent with the national GNTP and are legally binding for development control (Aliaj et al., 2024). Most of these processes were initialized in 2016–2018, with donor and state funding, and are valid for 15 years but are intended as adaptive and their contents can vary *in itinere*. Importantly, they are subject to Strategic Environmental Assessments, ensuring that their impact is systematically evaluated during plan development. However, they do not encompass neither outcome-driven indicators aligned with the EU Green Deal (like GHG emissions) nor social justice matter (Filipović et al., 2022; Streimikiene, 2024).

Overall, the reform made sustainability a central requirement for most planning processes, and all the national and regional strategies were drafted considering circular economy logics, with sustainability as a focal point of every plan. In practice, this means that local plans are expected to incorporate green transition principles such as low-carbon mobility, efficient land use, and resource recycling. However, while these commitments are often listed on paper, the reality of implementation challenges their validity and effectiveness,⁸ construction in protected coastal and natural areas continues despite legal safeguards, and urban densification, particularly in Tirana, has led to the loss of green spaces, conflicting with depollution commitments.

From discourse to practice: How prevalent is the just green transitions narrative?

EU Just Green Transitions discourses - from decarbonization to circular economy – are beginning to permeate Albania's national and local planning language (Toto et al., 2023). Government statements frequently reference alignment with European climate standards (JRC, 2021), and municipal plans increasingly mention sustainability frameworks such as the SDGs. However, the 'just' component of the transition – ensuring that vulnerable communities are not left behind – remains underdeveloped. Table 1 illustrates how Just Green transition jargon is variably received across key national spatial and environmental instruments. Mentions of decarbonization, adaptation, and climate change rise sharply after 2020, particularly in the draft NECP (Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy, 2024) and the Long-Term Renovation Strategy (under development). Yet the explicit mention of just transition is limited to energy and building sectors, and broader spatial planning instruments remain largely untouched by these developments.

⁸ For example, strategic projects like the gasification terminal and floating thermal plant in Vlorë reinforce fossil fuel reliance, undermining decarbonisation goals.

Table 1. Number of mentions of key Just Green transition' jargon in spatially relevant instruments – Albania (national level)

Year	Document Type	Title	NetZero / Decarbonization	Resilience/ Adaptation	SDGs / Sustainable Development	Climate Change	Just / Green Transition (Energy)	Spatial / Urban Planning
2014	Law	Law no. 107/2014 “On Territorial Planning and Development”	0	0	11	0	0	~150
2015	Plan	General National Territorial Plan	6	~20	15	~50	0	~200
2016	Plan	Intersectoral Plan for Tirana-Durrës Area	0	0	8	23	1	~92
2016	Plan	Intersectoral Plan for Coastal Area	2	19	14	50	0	~110
2018	Plan	National Plan for touristic development of the Alps	0	0	36	4	0	35
2019	Action Plan	National Climate Change Action Plan 2020–2030	0	47	26	50	0	0
2019	Plan	National Plan for Air Quality Management	0	0	0	7	0	~20
2020	Law	Law No. 155/2020 “On Climate Change”	1	11	4	24	0	1
2022	Strategy	Agriculture, Rural Dev. and Fisheries Strategy 2021–2027	2	15	5	11	0	2
2022	Strategy	National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction	0	~15	34	53	0	~14
2024	Strategy and Plan	National Strategy on Climate Change and Action Plans (NECP, revised) 2024–2030	103	3	6	~80	4	0
2024	Strategy	National Strategy for agrotourism	0	0	7	4	1	6
2024	Strategy	National Strategy for Tourism 2024-2030	0	0	28	0	0	2
2025	Law	Draft Law on Energy Performance in Buildings	15	1	0	3	0	5
2025	Strategy	Draft National Long-term renovation strategy of building stock	68	0	4	5	2	4

Source: authors' own elaboration.

From a temporal perspective, the rhetorics related to just transitions appear only after 2022, but sparsely – primarily in the context of energy efficiency, decarbonisation, and building renovation. However, these references remain sectoral and technical, lacking the broader socio-spatial framing typically associated with just transitions (e.g., territorial equity, vulnerable communities, employment shifts, and access to green services). On the spatial planning side, the integration of climate and transition-related terms remains partial and mostly symbolic. For instance, foundational spatial planning documents such as the [General National Territorial Plan \(2015\)](#) and the Intersectoral Plans for Tirana-Durrës and the Coastal Area (2016) include significant mentions of climate change (50+) and resilience/adaptation, but no mention of just transition and limited or no references to green transition. They reflect an awareness of climate risks and spatial adaptation (e.g., coastal zones, flood exposure) but do not explicitly connect these issues to justice. Even the newer spatial strategies – such as the National Strategy for Tourism 2024–2030 or the Strategy for Agrotourism (2024) – mention sustainable development but continue to omit just transition narratives.

This gap is even more visible at the local level. A preliminary review of local strategies and plans from 2016 to 2024 reveals some progress in acknowledging climate change and energy issues, but minimal integration of just transition concepts. As shown in Table 2, the Municipality of Përmet’s Local Energy and Climate Plan (Municipality of Përmet, 2023) stands out for its 14 mentions of just or green transition, while municipalities such as Tirana, Elbasan, and Kurbin make no such reference. Moreover, GLTPs – despite being the most comprehensive local territorial instruments – continue to rely on outdated paradigms and show little adaptation to evolving climate policies.

Table 2. Number of mentions of key Just Green transition’ jargon in spatially relevant instruments – Albania (local level)

Territory	Year	Title	NetZero / Decarbonization	Resilience / Adaptation	SDGs/ Sustainable Development	Climate Change	Just Transition/ Green Transition	Spatial/ Urban Planning
Tirana	2018	Green City Action Plan (GCAP), Tirana	~28	~15	2	~20	0	14
Tirana	2023	Tirana Sustainable Development Strategy 2023 - 2027	~3	3	11	12	0	~4
Tirana	2021	Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan of Tirana	~6	14	1	0	0	~3
Tirana	2016	General Local Territorial Plan	4	2	3	6	0	>100
Shkodra	2017	Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan of Shkodra	0	0	8	2	0	5
Shkodra	2016	General Local Territorial Plan	3	0	8	12	0	>100
Përmet	2023	Local Energy and Climate Plan	~10	0	2	22	14	~5
Lezhë	2021	Local Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction	0	12	5	43	2	~40
Fier	2016	General Local Territorial Plan	5	2	3	7	0	>100
Elbasan	2016	General Local Territorial Plan	6	3	5	9	0	>100
Kurbin	2024	Local Action Plan for Energy Efficiency	5	0	0	3	1	1
Elbasan	2023	Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan	4	6	1	16	0	1

Source: authors’ own elaboration.

A helpful case to illustrate this gap between narrative and implementation is the GLTP ‘Tirana 2030’. Approved in 2016, the plan envisions the city as a ‘sustainable metropolis in equilibrium with nature’ and prioritises green infrastructure, multimodal transport, and energy efficiency (Municipality of Tirana, 2018). Notable initiatives include the Metropolitan Forest (Metrobosco), the expansion of bicycle lanes, and the integration of green spaces in urban regeneration. However, there is no monitoring mechanism for decarbonisation outcomes nor any structured participation by affected communities in the design of green investments. The strategy presents sustainability as a vision but fails to link it to concrete redistributive policies or inclusive transition pathways (Toto et al., 2023). This disconnection is not unique to Tirana. In other municipalities, planning narratives also feature terms such as ‘sustainability’ and ‘resilience’, but with limited connection to climate mitigation or energy equity. For instance, Elbasan’s Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (2023) aligns with Covenant of Mayors principles and sets out energy reduction targets but does not assess territorial disparities in energy access or affordability (Municipality of Elbasan,

2023). Similarly, Përmet's 2023 Local Energy and Climate Plan stands out for its explicit references to just transition (14 mentions) but remains an isolated case among municipalities.

Across the board, there is limited institutional infrastructure to enable multi-level coordination or civic engagement in spatial aspects of climate transition. Participation remains procedural rather than deliberative, often limited to public hearings without follow-up or community co-design. Furthermore, GLTPs which remain the cornerstone of spatial governance at the municipal level, continue to operate in isolation from recent climate policy discourse. This disconnect highlights a broader temporal and institutional gap: while energy and climate strategies are evolving rapidly in response to external (mainly EU) policy stimuli, spatial planning frameworks remain anchored in pre-2020 paradigms, with little linkage to climate justice, employment transition or community engagement (Sanfey & Milatovic, 2018).

From Symbolic Alignment to Operational Integration

Discursively, EU's green transition concepts now seem to permeate Albania's climate and energy policy language. The NECP (draft, Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy, 2024) uses the language of climate neutrality, decarbonisation, and energy efficiency and includes references to social impacts and employment restructuring. It also references the importance of 'leaving no one behind,' in line with the Sofia Declaration (Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy, 2024). However, these references remain marginal in spatial planning documents, even those developed post-2020. Several factors explain this disjuncture. First, spatial planning documents have longer update cycles and often reflect pre-EGD priorities. Second, national-level coordination between ministries (Environment, Energy, Infrastructure, and Local Governance) remains limited, and planning instruments are rarely revised to reflect emerging climate obligations. Third, capacity constraints and donor dependency at the municipal level restrict the uptake of complex, cross-sectoral agendas like just transitions (UNEP, 2021). However, there are signs of gradual convergence. The 2022 National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction references climate equity and vulnerable groups, while Law No. 155/2020 mandates the integration of adaptation into sectoral and territorial plans. Some municipalities, such as Elbasan and Kurbin, have begun addressing energy poverty and equity concerns, particularly when international funding conditions necessitate it.

North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, spatial governance and planning is disciplined by the Law on Spatial and Urban planning, approved in 2005, recently updated by the [Law on Urban Planning \(2020\)](#) that however had created some sort of legal vacuum in relation to spatial planning. At the same time, the Law on the Environment, also approved in 2005, governs the rights and duties of the central and local governments, as well as the rights and duties of legal entities and individuals, in providing conditions for the protection and improvement of the environment, to exercise the right of citizens to a healthy environment. The main spatial planning instrument of the country is the rather outdated Spatial Plan of North Macedonia, a strategic, long-term, integral and developmental document that ensures the organisation, protection and management of the State's space as a particularly valuable and limited national treasure. Public participation is governed by the Law on the Environmental Protection, specifically in relation to decisions on the designation of protected areas, spatial planning documents for protected areas, management plans for protected areas, and plans or projects involving the use of natural resources that affect nature.

The most recent document adopted in the country that presents some sort of spatial implication is the National Development Strategy 2024-2044, a long-term strategic document that with an inclusive, analytical and participatory approach resulted in an apolitical, inclusive, long-term, development document with identified priorities. Among the six strategic areas composing the strategy promoted by the document, one concerns green transition and covers topics related to environment, climate change and habitats, energy system, water and waste management and digital transformation. The mission of this strategic area is to strengthen North Macedonia's commitment to green transformation and to position as a regional leader in sustainable development and environmental protection, while advancing the transition to a low-carbon economy and supporting economic growth. Its core objective is to substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve air quality and energy efficiency, and foster a healthier living environment for citizens, while integrating gender mainstreaming into environmental policies and programs.

As this document is relatively new, there is not yet evidence concerning its operationalisation, and it is not clear whether and how it will be able to reach the goals stated within each of its strategic areas⁹. Importantly North Macedonia is currently developing a Law on Climate Action, which will constitute a key step in transitioning towards a low-carbon economy and climate resilience. While the law has been drafted, it is still pending parliamentary approval.

Translating rhetoric into place-based action

At the central and local government level, actors have an obligation to undertake various measures for environmental protection (protection and prevention of water, air, land, nature protection, noise protection and non-ionizing radiation). With the draft Law on climate action, the local governments are obliged to adapt their objectives, plans and actions to the national strategic objectives of the Strategy and the National Energy and Climate Plan. This law, which has been pending adoption now since many years, is a limiting factor for the realisation of the goals set by the Long-Term Climate Action Strategy of North Macedonia.

The development of the sectoral planning documents for adaptation to climate change must go through a broad consultative process and with due regard for the provisions for public participation in accordance with the regulations in the field of the environment. Local government as per the draft law on climate action may also develop regional sectoral and planning documents for adaptation to climate change. In the beginning of 2024, mayors of several municipalities in North Macedonia signed a Declaration on Active Environmental Protection and Climate Change Mitigation, uniting them, together with the Ministry of Environment and the civil society sector, to work together to address local environmental challenges and to take actions to adapt to and mitigate climate change.

As it is done in relation to the cases of Albania and Serbia, Table 3 shows how many times decarbonisation, adaptation, and other elements composing the Just Green Transitions jargon are mentioned in strategic documents.

⁹ More information available in [Republic of North Macedonia \(2025\)](#).

Table 3. Number of mentions of key Just Green transition' jargon in spatially relevant instruments – North Macedonia (national level)

Year	Document Type	Title	NetZero / Decarbonization	Resilience/ Adaptation	SDGs/ Sustainable Development	Climate Change	Just / Green Transition (Energy)	Spatial / Urban Planning
2014	Strategy	Program for the realization of the Strategy for the development of energy 2021-2025	31	0	4	12	9	24
2018	Strategy	National Strategy for the Transport Sector	0	0	2	10	0	2
2020	Plan	National energy and climate plan of the Republic of North Macedonia	56	14	9	26	8	18
2019	Strategy	Strategy for energy development in the Republic Of Macedonia until 2040	27	9	30	11	3	6
2015	Law	Law on the protection of nature	0	0	3	0	0	32
2021	Strategy	National strategy on agriculture and rural development	3	7	13	10	0	2
2021	Law	Packaging Management and packaging waste Law	0	0	0	0	0	0
2020	Law	The law on energy efficiency	0	0	1	0	0	0
2022	Law	The law on energy	0	0	0	1	0	0
2010	Strategy	National strategy for sustainable development in North Macedonia	4	11	210	6	1	16
2020	Law	Urban planning Law	0	0	2	0	0	1
2005	Law	Law on environment	0	0	0	1	0	0

Source: authors' own elaboration.

As for the local governments, Table 4 visualises the recurrence of Just Green Transitions jargon within the strategic documents approved by North Macedonia municipalities.

Table 4. Number of mentions of key Just Green transition' jargon in spatially relevant instruments – North Macedonia (local level)

Territory	Year	Title	NetZero / Decarbonization	Resilience / Adaptation	SDGs/ Sustainable Development	Climate Change	Just Transition/ Green Transition	Spatial/ Urban Planning
Skopje	2017	Resilient Skopje-Climate Change Strategy	1	18	20	28	1	8
Bogdanci	2014	Climate Change Strategy	23	3	16	31	0	1
Mavrovo Rostushe	2015	Climate Change Strategy	41	3	8	28	0	0
Prilep	2016	Climate strategy of Prilep	107	0	5	26	0	13
Kichevo	2022	Plan for improving the quality of the Ambient air in Kichevo	135	0	6	17	0	25

Source: authors' own elaboration.

First, it must be said that these strategies at the local government level are donor driven. Second, just and green transitions is mentioned only for the city of Skopje. This is interesting because the just green transitions should be place based e.g., should be driven with a bottom-up participation by the local communities but from this exercise of numbering mentions in strategic documents we cannot find evidence of place-based just transitioning. The strategic documents at the local government level mentioned above, are donor-driven, referencing national strategies and legislation, and are developed by experts with little to no contribution from the communities, e.g., mostly desk research and office-based expert output. In future these strategies will be challenging to implement and might even question the credibility of these documents.

Challenges to Operationalisation

The situation in North Macedonia on spatial planning for Just Green Transition is limited due to slow adoption of the proper documents. The adopted approach remains largely top-down, in so doing posing challenges in terms of spatial justice and place-baseness. Just transition policies and legislation and the rather weak dedicated governance configuration make the situation even more complex. For example, the State audit office in its performance audit on measures and policies taken by competent authorities in North Macedonia with the purpose of mitigating the climate changes, states that the established legal and institutional framework does not allow for efficient and effective implementation and monitoring of the adopted measures and policies for climate change mitigation, and it is necessary to undertake activities at the national and local levels to overcome the situation ([State Audit Office, 2025](#)). Also, the State audit office states that the authorities in North Macedonia have not yet established links of communication between the institutions, during the adoption of strategic documents, which determine the policy and the goals of land use, the goals of economic development in North Macedonia related to climate change. On the municipalities, it states that although some municipalities have adopted strategies for climate change and their role in mitigating climate change, implementation and results are still minimal.

On the positive side, for the moment, it looks like the central government understands that it has a responsibility to link the policy design and its implementation among different levels of government, supported by both contractual relations and trust. The signed Declaration on Active Environmental Protection and Climate Change Mitigation among the municipalities, the Ministry of Environment and the civil society sector, to work together to address local environmental challenges and take actions to adapt to and mitigate climate change raises a lot of expectations for the future implementation. This is even more important because the 'distant' central government that governs the exogenous intervention by setting the priorities, rules and general objectives and leaving it to lower levels of government to implement these principles according to the context as the central government sees fit requires a bottom-up approach for the green transition. The challenge here with North Macedonia, again, is that there is not really a devolution in the decentralization thus, the lower government level e.g., municipalities do not have experience nor resources in practicing devolution yet not to take action to implement place-based principles set by the central government level in the just green transition. There are limited human and technical resources for climate change at central and local governments in North Macedonia, which affects their efficient functioning. Overall, North Macedonia legal provisions lack a clear budgetary definition in relation to climate objectives, hence it is not possible to monitor and verify the effects of public expenditures on the mitigation of climate change.

Serbia

Serbia's efforts toward achieving the EU's advocated JGT are taking shape through a range of initiatives aimed at reconciling spatial development with principles of sustainability, environmental protection, and social equity. Various ongoing projects and policy efforts, such as those promoting renewable energy, circular economy practices, low-emission mobility, and biodiversity conservation, indicate an increasing awareness of green transition priorities. While these actions signal Serbia's intent to align with broader European objectives, their deeper institutionalisation remains closely tied to changes within the spatial planning system.

The Impact of Just Green Transitions on Spatial Planning Discourse

The European Union's documents related to the Just Green Transitions are influencing the discourse in the field of spatial planning of many countries, including in Serbia. Serbia's spatial planning system, governed by the Law on Planning and Construction (2009, updated in 2014), comprises four types of plans: The Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia, Regional Spatial Plans, Spatial Plans for Local Self-government, and Spatial Plans for Special-Purpose Areas, while the adoption of a new (third) national-level Spatial Plan is pending ([Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2009](#)). As a key document, its adoption is expected to initiate a new cycle of drafting spatial plans at the regional and local levels. The influence of EU Just Green Transitions documents becomes more evident in the development of the Draft of the Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia until 2035 ([Ministry of Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure of the Republic of Serbia, 2021](#)), which integrates concepts such as the green economy, resource management, and climate change mitigation. It also emphasises renewable energy and introduces the concept of green infrastructure. In defining the spatial development concept of the national territory, relevant existing strategic documents, development plans, and public policies are thoroughly analysed and utilised. Based on this foundation, the Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia provides guidelines for implementing and further developing solutions and proposals already outlined in these documents, addressing a range of issues relevant to achieving a just green transition in Serbia. For topics aligned with Just Green Transitions' principles, key reference documents include the Forestry Development Strategy, Agricultural and Rural Development Strategy, Water Management Strategy, National Strategy for Sustainable Use of Natural Resources, and the Energy Development Strategy.

EU documents such as the European Green Deal and directives on renewable energy, energy efficiency, and the circular economy have steered national policies towards sustainable land use. In practice, this involves integrating principles of energy efficiency, natural resource conservation, and biodiversity enhancement into spatial and urban plans, development plans for urban areas, and other planning documents. The EU emphasises the importance of green and blue infrastructures, which encompass the creation of green corridors and recreational spaces. These elements are becoming key components of local spatial plans, particularly in urban areas. For instance, urban development plans for Belgrade and Novi Sad include measures to increase resilience to climate change, such as adapting sewage systems and expanding green areas. In Novi Pazar, spatial planning documents have integrated measures for climate adaptation, including improving wastewater management systems and planting trees to mitigate urban heat island effects.

Documents such as the Smart and Sustainable Mobility Strategy encourage the promotion of public transportation, cycling, and pedestrian infrastructure in urban plans. In alignment with these principles, Serbia is working on projects such as developing environmentally friendly public transportation systems and urban mobility plans. Spatial plans for Belgrade and Niš,

for example, include developing cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, introducing electric buses, and expanding parks and promenades. In line with European principles of transparency and accountability, the participatory approach in spatial planning processes is increasingly emphasized, allowing public involvement in decision-making. This has been addressed explicitly through amendments to the existing Law on Planning and Construction, introducing 'Early Public Insight' as a mandatory step in the preparation of planning documents. This enables public participation at the initial stages of document development. The influence of EU JGT documents is also reflected in compliance with directives such as: The Habitats and Birds Directive, for planning protected areas, The Environmental Impact Assessment Directive and Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive, which are mandatory components of spatial and urban planning processes.

The Impact of Just Green Transitions on Spatial Planning Instruments

In the context of aligning with EU objectives, spatial planning in Serbia has emerged as a significant domain through which transition-related priorities are being articulated and pursued. The Just Green Transitions agenda has notably influenced the development and enhancement of spatial planning instruments in Serbia, orienting them more clearly toward sustainability, ecological equity, and resilience to climate change.

This transformation is evident in several key dimensions. One of the most discernible shifts is the growing emphasis on sustainable development as a guiding rationale for strategic planning. Spatial plans are progressively coupling economic growth strategies with imperatives to safeguard environmental assets. This reorientation is complemented by a stronger focus on climate change mitigation, with growing attention to green infrastructure, flood risk management, and energy efficiency across urban contexts. Planning instruments have also benefited from methodological advancements, notably through the wider use of geographic information systems, which support scenario modelling and systematic monitoring of indicators such as air quality, biodiversity, and energy consumption. In addition, the integration of Environmental Impact Assessments) and Strategic Environmental Assessments into spatial and urban planning procedures has become a mandatory practice, reinforcing environmental considerations across planning stages. A further shift involves prioritising the redevelopment of brownfield sites over the expansion into natural areas, reflecting the circular economy logic encouraged by EU frameworks. The role of spatial planning in supporting renewable energy development has also become increasingly prominent, with plans routinely identifying zones for wind and solar installations, as seen in the Spatial Plan of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. Participatory approaches have gained traction as well, especially through early public insight mechanisms that enhance transparency and public trust. Green standards are being progressively integrated into urban planning, encompassing energy-efficient construction practices, rooftop greening, and the adoption of low-emission technologies such as LED lighting. Lastly, increasing emphasis is being placed on intersectoral coordination in the preparation of spatial plans. Deliberate efforts are made to align planning with sectoral strategies in areas such as energy, transport, agriculture, and tourism, thereby enhancing the coherence and effectiveness of Just Green Transitions implementation.

Despite these positive developments, important implementation challenges persist, particularly at the local level. Many municipalities, especially those in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, continue to face serious constraints in administrative capacity, financial resources, and technical expertise. As a result, spatial plans often reflect outdated development logics, with limited integration of climate resilience, low-carbon mobility, or social equity concerns. This implementation gap highlights the need for targeted capacity-building, improved coordination

between planning tiers, and mechanisms to ensure that transition-related objectives are not only formulated but also effectively realised in diverse territorial contexts.

Adoption of New Regulations related to Just Green Transitions

Serbia is aligning its legislation in spatial planning and environmental protection with EU Just Green Transitions documents. Key international frameworks include the Paris Climate Agreement and EU directives such as the Habitats and Birds Directive (for protected areas), the Renewable Energy Directive (RED II) (for renewable energy zones), the Water Framework Directive (for watershed management), and the Waste Management Directive (integrating circular economy principles). Regionally, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans supports these efforts, promoting sustainable development and environmental resilience. Key national legislative documents to support JGT are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5. Serbian legislative document, strategies and action plans resulting from EU Just Green Transitions influence

National Laws	National Strategies, Action Plans and Programs
Law on Planning and Construction (with amendments) (2023)	Low-Carbon Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2023–2030 with Projections until 2050
Law on Environmental Protection (2024)	National Renewable Energy Action Plan of the Republic of Serbia (2013)
Law on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) (2024)	Sustainable Urban Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030
Law on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) (2024)	National Waste Management Program for the Period 2022-2030
Law on Nature Protection (2021)	National Rural Development Program for the Period 2022-2024
Law on Waters (2018)	
Law on Climate Change (2021)	

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Although the legislative framework has been largely adopted, implementation challenges remain. Key obstacles include insufficient sectoral integration (e.g., transportation, energy, agriculture), limited financial resources for implementing JGT measures, and inadequate education of local communities and institutions. There is even an opinion that Serbian society is characterized by an overproduction of regulations, strategic documents, etc. (Rajčević, 2016; Jovanović & Andonović, 2021), particularly in the field of environmental protection (Todić, 2017). Despite evident progress, issues such as financial constraints, conflicting interests (between development and environmental protection), and raising public awareness about the importance of these changes persist.

Just Green Transitions Discourse in National and Local Strategic, Planning and Legislative Documents

To complement the analysis presented in previous sections, this subsection explores the extent to which key 'just green transitions' terms are present in documents framing Serbia's transition efforts. The approach follows the structure used for Albania and North Macedonia and is based on a systematic mapping of terminology mentions across national and local-level strategic and legal instruments. The presence (or absence) of references to concepts such as decarbonisation, resilience, sustainable development, climate change, and just transition provides an indirect but useful indication of the penetration of JGT discourse into Serbia's strategic, planning and legislative framework.

Table 6 presents the frequency of such terms in selected national-level documents, including laws, strategies, plans, and programs. It shows that while climate change and sustainable development are increasingly embedded in strategic texts (most notably in the Biodiversity Strategy and the Integrated National Climate and Energy Plan), explicit references to just transition remain rare. In fact, out of all the analysed national-level documents, only three mention the term ‘just green transition’ at all. Notably, the draft Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia to 2035, despite its high number of references to climate change and spatial planning, does not include any mention of the concept. INECP stands out as the only document with substantial use of all the key terms analysed, including notable references to decarbonisation, adaptation, sustainable development, and climate change, as well as to the just transition, predominantly in the context of the energy sector.

Table 6. Number of mentions of key Just Green transition’ jargon in spatially relevant instruments – Serbia (national level)

Year	Document Type	Title	Net-Zero / Decarbonization	Resilience/ Adaptation	SDGs/ Sustainable Development	Climate Change	Just / Green Transition (Energy)	Spatial / Urban Planning
2009	Law	The Law on planning and construction (Planning and Building Act)	0	0	0	1	0	30
2009	Law	The Law on Waste Management	0	0	0	0	0	3
2010	Strategy	National strategy for inclusion of the Republic of Serbia into the clean development mechanism	0	0	26	15	0	4
2010	Law	The Law on Waters	0	0	3	2	0	4
2011	Law	The Law on Environmental Protection	0	0	3	1	0	2
2011	Strategy	Biodiversity Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the Period from 2011 to 2018	0	4	46	61	0	54
2012	Law	The Law on Soil Protection	0	0	0	0	0	0
2014	Program	AP Vojvodina Development Programme 2014-2020	0	1	7	0	0	7
2016	Program	The Environmental protection program of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina for the period 2016-2025	0	0	0	10	0	3
2018	Law	Law on the protection and sustainable use of fish stocks	0	0	0	0	0	0
2018	Law	Law on the Planning System of the Republic of Serbia	0	0	0	3	0	2
2019	Strategy	Climate Strategy & Action Plan Republic of Serbia	0	49	4	98	0	2
2020	Strategy	Sustainable urban development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030.	0	3	7	13	1	7
2021	Law	The Law on Energy Efficiency and Rational use of Energy	0	0	0	3	0	0
2021	Law	The Law on Nature Protection	0	0	6	1	0	6

2021	Strategy	Industrial Policy Strategy of the Republic of Serbia from 2021 to 2030.	0	0	1	3	0	1
2021	Plan	Integrated National Climate and Energy Plan for the period 2021 to 2030 with a vision until 2050 (INECP)	11	25	6	43	14	10
2021	Plan	Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia to 2035 - draft document	1	2	42	139	0	43
2022	Program	Waste Management Program of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022-2031	0	2	10	4	1	4
2022	Strategy	Strategic Plan of the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities – National Association of Local Authorities in Serbia	0	2	9	9	0	4

Source: authors' own elaboration.

At the local level, the uptake of green transition terminology is more uneven. Table 7 illustrates the distribution of key terms across planning and strategy documents from two selected Serbian cities. Belgrade's Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan stands out for its strong emphasis on climate change and adaptation, although it does not specifically reference a just transition. In the case of Kragujevac, the presence of green transition-related terminology varies significantly across documents. While analysed documents show a certain attention to sustainability and spatial planning, the integration of broader Just Green Transitions concepts is inconsistent and does not explicitly refer to just transition.

Table 7. Number of mentions of key Just Green transition' jargon in spatially relevant instruments – Serbia (local level)

Territory	Year	Title	Net-Zero / Decarbonization	Resilience / Adaptation	SDGs/ Sustainable Development	Climate Change	Just Transition/ Green Transition	Spatial/ Urban Planning
Belgrade	2019	Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan for the City of Belgrade (SUMP)	0	2	4	4	0	4
Belgrade	2021	Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan for the City of Belgrade	1	197	3	103	0	32
Kragujevac	2009	Spatial Plan of the City of Kragujevac	0	0	27	0	0	5
Kragujevac	2013	Sustainable Development Strategy of the City of Kragujevac 2013-2018	0	6	7	1	0	7
Kragujevac	2023	Urban Plan for Kragujevac urban settlement	0	2	6	15	0	9

Source: authors' own elaboration.

While the quantitative presence of terms is not sufficient to assess the depth of integration, these tables suggest that the discourse around green transition is gradually entering Serbia's spatial planning landscape, particularly in terms of climate change and sustainability. However, the just dimension of the transition and its socio-territorial implications still demand more explicit articulation in both national and local documents.

Discussion

The spatial governance and planning systems of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia have all adapted in one way or another as a consequence of the consolidation of the Just Green Transitions framework at the EU level. The ways this has occurred are, however, different, despite the similar challenges that the three countries had to face in the process. In more detail, while all three countries have formally committed to the EU Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, the degree to which these commitments have reshaped planning frameworks, instruments, and practices varies considerably, reflecting diverse legal, institutional, and socio-political trajectories (Table 8). While Serbia appears to exhibit a relatively stronger legal and procedural integration of Just Green Transitions narratives, albeit with a technocratic bias and limited attention to the social equity dimension, Albania displays a more rhetorical alignment, marked by a number of innovative but isolated practices, which are constrained by weak institutionalisation and fragmented implementation. North Macedonia seems to be lagging behind, constrained by outdated legal frameworks, limited capacity, and a lack of any systemic integration of Just Green Transition principles into spatial governance and planning.

Table 8. The influence of Just Green Transition on spatial governance and planning systems

	Albania	North Macedonia	Serbia
Integration of JGT into formal planning frameworks	Partial and indirect. Spatial planning framework incorporates sustainability and environmental protection but lacks an explicit JGT or net-zero framing. Climate ambitions are more visible in sectoral strategies than in spatial plans.	Weak and structurally constrained. Spatial planning relies on an outdated national Spatial Plan (2004) and fragmented legislation; delayed climate governance reforms limit the formal embedding of JGT principles in spatial planning instruments.	Relatively stronger and more proceduralised. Draft Spatial Plan to 2035 integrates climate mitigation, green infrastructure and low-carbon development; SEA/EIA procedures are systematically embedded in planning practice.
Influence on strategic spatial development discourse	JGT ideas appear mainly through sustainability, resilience and energy-efficiency narratives, but remain secondary within spatial development discourse compared to climate and energy policy arenas.	Strategic documents increasingly reference green transition goals, yet these have only a limited impact on the dominant discourse, which remains rather outdated and poorly coordinated.	JGT-related themes (green economy, renewables, green-blue infrastructure) are more visible in strategic spatial discourse, although often framed through sectoral priorities rather than holistic transition narratives.
Rhetorical alignment vs operationalisation	Strong rhetorical alignment with sustainability and green transition agendas vs limited operationalisation in spatial planning instruments and local implementation; outcomes remain fragmented.	Wide rhetoric–practice gap. JGT language is present at strategic level, but operational translation into spatial governance is minimal due to institutional and legal constraints.	More operational traction through concrete planning tools (zoning, standards, indicators), but implementation tends to be technocratic and uneven across territories.

Spatial and social justice	Spatial and social justice goals are weakly articulated in spatial planning. Participation is mandatory but often procedural and with limited influence.	Spatial and social justice goals are marginal. Participatory practices are inconsistent and often donor-driven, with little institutionalisation.	Spatial and social justice goals are mainly limited to energy-transition debates. Participation is comparatively more consolidated.
Key governance conditions shaping JGT uptake	Weak multilevel coordination and limited municipal capacity hinder translation of national goals into local plans; donor-supported initiatives remain difficult to scale.	Strong dependence on external support, fragmented governance, and outdated planning architecture constrain systemic uptake of JGT principles.	Greater institutional capacity to absorb donor and EU-alignment agendas into planning, though local capacity gaps and limited justice-oriented framing persist.

Source: authors' own elaboration.

A first critical difference emerges in the integration of Just Green Transitions into formal planning frameworks. Serbia stands out for the relatively advanced incorporation of climate and green transition objectives into national-level plans, most notably in the Draft Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia until 2035, which includes explicit references to climate change mitigation, green infrastructure, and low-carbon development. Albania, by contrast, has embedded some sustainability narratives in its General National Territorial Plan (2016) and in the newer drafts of sectoral strategies, such as the National Energy and Climate Plan (2024–2030), but these remain poorly operationalised in local planning instruments. North Macedonia lags behind both, with a Spatial Plan dating back to 2004 and no updated framework that fully aligns with contemporary climate objectives. While Albania and North Macedonia share a reliance on external donor-funded projects – such as the Local Energy and Climate Plans in Albania and resilience strategies in the city of Skopje – these initiatives tend to remain isolated, lacking systemic integration into domestic spatial governance and planning systems. In contrast, Serbia seems to show a higher capacity to integrate donor-supported projects into the overall spatial planning framework, albeit with persisting limitations in addressing the ‘just’ dimensions of transition. This situation is worsened by the fact that all three countries continue to struggle with vertical coordination, although to varying degrees. Serbia’s planning system, although still marked by centralised tendencies, has progressively incorporated mechanisms dedicated to cross-sectoral integration, such as the use of Strategic Environmental Assessments and procedural tools like early public input, which provide a formal space for stakeholder engagement. Albania and North Macedonia, on the other hand, exhibit weaker multilevel coordination: in Albania, the 2014 Law on Territorial Planning and Development requires alignment across national and local levels, yet in practice, there is limited communication between tiers, and municipalities cannot often translate national objectives into local actions. North Macedonia faces even deeper challenges: the absence of a new national spatial plan and the long-delayed adoption of the draft Law on Climate Action created a legal vacuum that hampers both vertical and horizontal coordination. While Albania and Serbia have at least formal legal frameworks that acknowledge the role of subnational actors, North Macedonia’s outdated legal architecture isolates local planning efforts from national strategic objectives, reinforcing fragmentation.

Beyond formal integration into planning frameworks, Just Green have also reshaped (albeit unevenly) the strategic spatial development discourse across the three countries. In Serbia, related concepts are increasingly visible in national and sectorally-informed spatial narratives, particularly through references to green economy development, renewable energy deployment, climate adaptation, and green and blue infrastructure. These themes appear not only in climate and energy strategies but also in the evolving language of spatial planning documents, suggesting a partial discursive convergence between sectoral transition agendas and territorial development objec-

tives. However, this influence remains largely instrumental and technocratic. Green transition is primarily framed as a means to modernise infrastructure, enhance energy security, and align with EU environmental acquis, rather than as a transformative spatial project addressing territorial inequalities or socio-spatial restructuring.¹⁰ In Albania, the influence of JGT on strategic spatial discourse is more fragmented and less coherent. Sustainability, resilience, and energy efficiency are increasingly referenced in national spatial narratives, particularly in relation to climate risks, environmental protection, and urban development pressures. However, these concepts are rarely articulated as part of an integrated Just Green Transitions storyline that links environmental objectives with economic restructuring and social justice, and spatial development narratives continues to prioritise growth-oriented objectives (e.g. tourism development, infrastructure expansion, and urban competitiveness). This results in a discursive layering, where Just Green Transitions co-exist with dominant development paradigms. North Macedonia exhibits the weakest discursive influence of Just Green Transitions narratives on strategic spatial development. While national policy documents increasingly align rhetorically with the EU Green Agenda, these narratives have had minimal impact on spatial planning discourse, which remains largely disconnected from contemporary transition debates. The absence of an updated national spatial plan significantly constrains the ability of JGT to inform strategic territorial thinking, leaving spatial development narratives anchored in outdated frameworks and sectoral silos. Consequently, climate and green transition objectives are addressed primarily through environmental or energy policies, with limited consideration of their spatial implications.

Importantly all three countries exhibit a gap between rhetorical alignment with EU Just Green Transition narratives and their substantive operationalisation through their spatial governance and planning systems. Serbia frequently references climate change and sustainability in national strategies, such as the Low-Carbon Development Strategy (2023–2030), but the focus remains largely on sectoral decarbonisation rather than holistic spatial justice. Albania similarly references energy efficiency and resilience in national-level documents, but these concepts are not systematically embedded in spatial planning instruments like the GNTP or the majority of General Local Territorial Plans. North Macedonia's rhetoric aligns with the Green Agenda, yet concrete references to just transition principles are largely absent from both national and municipal planning documents.¹¹ The distributive dimension of the Just Green Transition, i.e. addressing who benefits and who bears the burdens – remains weakly articulated across all three countries, but manifests differently in each case. In Serbia, distributive justice is primarily discussed in the context of energy sector reforms, with limited integration into broader spatial justice debates. Albania, while rhetorically supportive of equitable development, has yet to develop concrete tools for assessing vulnerability or redistributing resources in spatial terms. North Macedonia rarely engages with distributive justice at all, focusing instead on sectoral priorities without explicit attention to territorial equity or the needs of marginalised communities.

The above is worsened by the fact that participatory mechanisms remain limited across all three countries (see also Berisha et al., 2021b). Whereas Serbia has institutionalised early public insight procedures in its planning process, offering a more structured mechanism for stakeholder input, Albania mandates participation through its planning law but often reduces it to formal hearings with limited influence on outcomes, while North Macedonia lacks consistent participatory

¹⁰ As a result, while the discourse has evolved, it tends to reproduce a sectoral logic that limits the potential to inform a more holistic vision of spatial development.

¹¹ Interestingly, while Serbia shows stronger legal and discursive alignment with Just Green Transitions narratives, Albania exhibits more scattered but occasionally innovative practices through pilot projects.

mechanisms in spatial governance altogether. Donor-driven projects in both Albania and North Macedonia have occasionally fostered participatory dialogues, yet these remain ad hoc and disconnected from statutory planning processes. Albania and North Macedonia are overall more reliant on donor-funded initiatives to introduce climate and sustainability concepts into spatial planning. In Albania, projects like the Local Council on Public Safety in Elbasan and Përmet demonstrate some integration of transition goals, but these remain isolated and unsustainable without a clear mechanism for scaling or institutional embedding. North Macedonia displays an even greater reliance on externally funded projects, yet seems to lack the legal instruments or institutional capacity to mainstream these initiatives into its spatial governance system. On the other hand Serbia, while also engaging with donor support, demonstrates comparatively higher internal capacity to integrate climate objectives into formal planning instruments, though implementation gaps remain.

Overall, across Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, the uptake of Just Green Transition principles in spatial governance and planning is shaped primarily by differences in institutional capacity, multilevel coordination, and the ability to internalise externally driven agendas. While all three countries formally align with EU green transition objectives, their governance systems vary significantly in their capacity to translate these commitments into spatial planning practice. Albania's uptake is constrained by weak multilevel coordination and limited municipal capacity. Although the planning system formally requires alignment between national and local levels, in practice communication across governance tiers remains limited, and municipalities often struggle to operationalise national transition objectives. Donor-supported initiatives have played a key role in introducing climate and sustainability considerations into spatial planning, yet these remain fragmented and difficult to scale due to insufficient institutional embedding. North Macedonia faces even deeper governance challenges. The combination of an outdated national spatial plan, fragmented institutional arrangements, and delayed climate legislation has resulted in a governance vacuum that severely limits the systemic uptake of JGT principles. Local planning initiatives are largely disconnected from national strategic objectives, reinforcing a reliance on externally funded, project-based interventions. The lack of institutional mechanisms to mainstream these initiatives further constrains learning, continuity, and integration within the spatial governance system. Serbia, by contrast, demonstrates comparatively stronger institutional capacity to absorb JGT-related agendas into its formal planning framework. Despite persistent centralisation and uneven local implementation, Serbia has developed procedural mechanisms that facilitate cross-sectoral integration and allow donor- and EU-driven objectives to be more effectively internalised within spatial planning instruments. Nevertheless, this governance capacity remains largely oriented towards technical and regulatory compliance, with limited attention to the distributive and justice-oriented dimensions of transition.

Taken together, these observations provide a basis for reflecting on several avenues for further research. Future studies could complement this document-based approach with empirical investigations into how Just Green Transition principles are implemented in planning practice, particularly at the subnational level. Comparative and longitudinal analyses could additionally help assess whether recent strategic shifts translate into concrete governance arrangements and spatial planning outcomes over time.

Concluding remarks and future research perspectives

This paper set out to explore whether, how and to what extent the narratives of Just Green Transitions have been influencing the evolution of spatial governance and planning systems in the Western Balkans. From a conceptual perspective, the paper contributes to the growing comparative spatial planning literature by explicitly linking Just Green Transitions debates to the analysis of spatial planning systems in EU accession contexts. While existing scholarship has largely focused either on sectoral transition policies or on Europeanisation processes in planning, this study bridges these strands by showing how Just Green Transitions narratives are mediated through planning institutions, legal frameworks, and territorial governance arrangements.

By focusing on the cases of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, the presented analysis offered a comparative and nuanced understanding of how these countries are adapting their discourses, legal frameworks and planning instruments to align with the EU's normative and procedural expectations, while grappling with the limited institutional capacity and fragmented governance structures. Through a general analysis of planning documents, legal frameworks, and policy discourses, the study has confirmed that the Europeanisation of spatial planning is not a linear or uniform process, but rather a complex, contested, and often uneven dynamic shaped by national contexts, institutional path-dependencies, and the tensions between compliance-driven adaptation and transformative change. While all three countries formally are embracing the rhetoric of Just Green Transitions, their practical engagement with the underlying principles – particularly the integration of social justice and territorial equity into planning systems – remains fragmented and often rather limited, if one excludes Serbia's integration of climate and sustainability concerns into a largely technocratic and sectoral approach, with limited attention to distributive justice or participatory governance. Interestingly, these findings align at least partly with insights from comparable studies on green transitions and planning in other post-socialist and accession contexts, showing that Europeanisation influences often lead to a selective internalisation of transition agendas, mediated by domestic institutional capacity, governance traditions and sectoral priorities (Schimmelfenning, 2010; Sedelmeier, 2011; Cotella et al., 2012; Adams et al., 2014). In this light, the Western Balkans' cases illustrate how the Just Green Transitions narratives are appropriated, reinterpreted, and selectively internalised within domestic planning cultures, shaped by historical legacies, political economies, and the asymmetries of the accession process. While the EU provides a robust normative and financial framework, its influence is mediated through domestic institutions, capacities, and interests, resulting in a highly differentiated and uneven landscape of adaptation.¹²

Overall, the spatial governance and planning systems that characterise the three countries continue to exhibit pronounced hierarchical tendencies, in which central governments retain significant control over strategic agendas and resource allocation, while local authorities, despite being tasked with implementing transition-related objectives, lack the necessary financial and technical resources to perform effectively (Berisha & Cotella, 2021; Berisha et al., 2024).¹³ As a partial consequence of this misalignment, the provided evidence shows the existence of a pervasive

¹² This finding resonates with broader critiques of the EU's meta-governance approach, which, while promoting convergence around shared objectives, often overlooks the practical realities of implementation in candidate countries operating under conditions of limited sovereignty, constrained resources, and fragile governance architectures (Adams et al., 2011; Berisha et al., 2021; Shaker & Berisha, 2025).

¹³ This imbalance reflects a broader challenge in the Europeanisation process: while the EU's normative frameworks encourage multilevel governance, cross-sectoral integration, and stakeholder participation, their translation into the Western Balkans often reinforces existing centralised and hierarchical structures, rather than fostering genuinely collaborative and place-based governance models.

gap between discourse and practice. While terms pertaining to the Just Green Transitions jargon are increasingly present in national strategies and, to a lesser extent, in planning documents, their operationalisation into actionable, place-based policies remains limited. The 'just' component of the transition is particularly underdeveloped: in all three countries, there is scant evidence of systematic efforts to address issues of distributive justice, such as the uneven spatial impacts of decarbonisation, access to green infrastructure, or the needs of vulnerable populations. Instead, the Just Green Transitions agenda is often interpreted through a technocratic lens, focused on sectoral targets, emissions reductions, and compliance with EU regulations, rather than as a holistic, socio-spatial transformation aimed at fostering equity, resilience, and inclusion. This narrow framing risks reinforcing existing inequalities and reproducing patterns of exclusion, particularly in peripheral and rural areas that are already marginalised within national development trajectories.

It is important to acknowledge that the study has been characterised by a number of methodological limitations. First, its analysis relies primarily on legal frameworks strategic/policy documents and spatial plans, which capture formal intentions and discourses but do not fully reflect informal practices nor implementation dynamics. Moreover, the absence of systematic empirical data on distributive outcomes limits the ability to assess the actual socio-spatial impacts of transition policies. Despite these constraints, the results carry a few policy and planning insights, that may inform the activity of decision and policymakers. First and foremost, they underscore the need to move beyond a narrow, sectoral understanding of green transition towards a more integrated spatial perspective that explicitly addresses territorial inequalities and the uneven impacts of decarbonisation. Equally important, multilevel governance and institutional capacity emerge as key preconditions for an effective domestic translation and implementation of Just Green Transitions objectives. Without adequate technical, financial, and institutional support at the subnational levels, national transition strategies risk remaining rhetorical exercises that do not produce any relevant impact. Third, participatory mechanisms need to be substantially strengthened and reframed, moving from procedural consultation towards more deliberative and inclusive forms of engagement that allow local communities (and vulnerable groups in particular) to meaningfully shape transition priorities.

To further shed light on the above, a number of research avenues may prove rewarding. First, there is a need for more in-depth, longitudinal studies that trace the evolution of spatial planning systems in the Western Balkans over time, capturing how the Just Green Transitions narratives and policies interact with shifting political, economic, and institutional dynamics. To monitor the evolution of legislation and policy on a longer time horizon could illuminate the extent to which current trends represent incremental adjustments, path-dependent inertia, or more substantive transformations in planning cultures and practices. At the same time, future research should explore the micro-level dynamics of Just Green Transitions implementation and how local planners, civil society organisations, and community actors engage with, resist, or reshape the development agendas of specific territorial contexts. This perspective could provide critical insights into the agency of non-state actors and the conditions under which participatory and place-based approaches can emerge, despite structural constraints. Finally, the collected information evidences a pressing need to investigate the distributive impacts (i.e. economic and power relations) of transition policies across different territories and social groups within the Western Balkans, as only understanding who gains and who benefits, and how spatial planning can act as a mediating tool to mitigate these inequalities, it will be possible to realising the promise of a truly Just Green Transitions.

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