

Advocacy Document

“The Voice of the Community”

Gathering and Validating the Community's Perspectives on the Pelagonia Region's Energy Transition, Reskilling Initiatives, and Regional Local Development – Inputs for the Territorial Just Transition Plan



130+
participants



4+4
activities



2
Forum user



Voices for a Just Transition

Pelagonia Region · Bitola · Novaci · Mogila · Demir Hisar



Commissioned by

Youth Cultural Center – Bitola

As part of the project: Voices for a Just Transition

Author: Katica Mihajlovikj

This document was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Youth Cultural Center – Bitola, and they cannot be taken to necessarily reflect the views of the European Union or the Belgrade Open School.



Bitola, September 2026

Contents

Advocacy Document “The Voice of the Community” - Overview of Chapters

Executive summary	4
1. Context	6
2. Legal and Institutional Framework Relevant to the “REK Bitola” and the Just Transition	8
2.1. Annual Implementation Plan for the Just Transition (2026)	10
3. Local Strategic Framework for Socio-Economic Development	11
4. About the “Voices of Just Transition” Project	12
5. Findings from the “Learning Circles”	14
6. Consultations and Validation of Community Recommendations	15
6.1. First Forum – Gathering Community Opinions on the Just Transition	17
6.2. Second Forum – Presentation and Validation of Community Recommendations	23
6.3. Final Validated Community Recommendations	24
6.4. Cross-Sectoral and Institutional Recommendations	26
7. Alignment of Forum Findings with Key National and Local Strategic Frameworks	27
Bibliography	30



This document was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Youth Cultural Center – Bitola, and they cannot be taken to necessarily reflect the views of the European Union or the Belgrade Open School.





Executive summary

The Republic of North Macedonia is currently navigating a just energy transition, which entails phasing out coal-fired power generation in line with commitments undertaken within the Energy Community and the European Union accession process.

This transition will impact the Pelagonia region most, as, for decades, the region and its local development have been closely tied to the operations of the Mining and Energy Complex “Bitola” (dubbed “REK Bitola”).

As part of the project "Voices of Just Transition", funded by the European Union, the Youth Cultural Center (YCC) – Bitola organized a consultative forum aimed at actively engaging local stakeholders in developing recommendations for a just, inclusive, and sustainable transition.

Through two consecutive forums held in May and June 2026, representatives from public institutions, “REK Bitola”, local governments across the Pelagonia region, educational institutions, the civil sector, the business community, and local citizens jointly identified challenges, analyzed potential solutions, and prioritized measures for regional development.

The forum process demonstrated a high degree of consensus. Stakeholders seem to agree that while the energy transition is essential, its success will hinge on proactive planning, institutional transparency, and safeguarding the social and economic security of communities directly dependent on the coal industry.

As for the energy transition, participants highlighted the need for a clear national strategy complete with specific timelines and measures, diversifying energy sources by developing renewables, utilizing transitional technologies, and investing in modern energy storage systems.

In the areas of employment and human capital development, emphasis was placed on the timely planning of workforce transformation through the establishment of a regional retraining center, aligning educational programs with the needs of the green economy, conducting a detailed mapping of human capital at “REK Bitola”, and developing social protection mechanisms for workers most vulnerable to the transition

When it comes to local economic development, the forums highlighted the necessity of diversifying the regional economy by attracting new investments, developing industrial zones in rural municipalities, improving transport infrastructure, and providing ongoing support for green enterprises, the circular economy, and innovative local businesses.



One of the most significant takeaways from the forum process is that a just transition is not merely an energy shift, but a complex societal, economic, and developmental transformation that demands coordinated cooperation among the government, local authorities, businesses, educational institutions, trade unions, civil society organizations, and residents.

Only through proactive planning, transparent decision-making, and the active participation of all stakeholders can we ensure a transition that simultaneously cuts emissions, creates green jobs, and drives sustainable economic development in the Pelagonia region.

The recommendations outlined in this report stem from direct dialogue with the local community and provide a practical foundation for public policy and investment, paving the way for a fair, inclusive, and economically viable transition aligned with national strategic goals and European decarbonization and regional development policies. Furthermore, these recommendations will serve as a vital local contribution to the Territorial Just Transition Plan – a strategic document to be drafted by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia and the relevant ministries. By integrating the needs, perspectives, and priorities of Pelagonia's stakeholders, these recommendations aim to shape policies and measures that are grounded in reality, socially equitable, and sustainable, thereby ensuring a successful regional transformation and an improved quality of life for its citizens.



1. Context

01

The Republic of North Macedonia has embarked on the Just Transition process, aimed at gradually phasing out coal for electricity generation and transforming both the energy sector and regional economies.

Under the Energy Community, through the Energy Community Treaty, the countries of the Western Balkans, including the Republic of North Macedonia, made a legally binding commitment to comply with European Union (EU) legislation on energy, on building a low-carbon, energy-efficient, and renewables-based society. As a contracting party, the Republic of North Macedonia is therefore required to align its energy and climate legislation with the corresponding EU legal framework across five key pillars: energy security, the internal energy market, energy efficiency, decarbonization, and research, innovation and competitiveness.

Within the EU, political initiatives and regulations play a key role in providing the legal and regulatory frameworks needed to achieve targets for reducing harmful gas emissions. Through these efforts and cooperation, the Western Balkans region, including our country, has the opportunity to integrate into European energy and climate frameworks and contribute to the shared goal of reducing global emissions and protecting the environment. As a member of the Energy Community, the Republic of North Macedonia has committed to introducing a carbon levy by the end of 2026. By May 2027, the country will need to establish a functional system for collecting the carbon levy, as well as begin submitting annual reports on calculated emissions and paying the corresponding charges.

At the same time, to improve energy security, the country is working to reduce its dependence on coal, diversify its energy sources, and expand the renewable energy sector, including solar, wind, and hydropower.

Historically, the Pelagonia and Southwest regions (particularly the municipalities of Bitola, Novaci, and Kichevo/Oslomej) have relied heavily on coal mining. Coal accounts for over 40% of total domestic electricity production, yet the units of Thermal Power Plant (TPP) Bitola (part of “REK Bitola”) and TPP Oslomej continue to emit significant quantities of sulfur dioxide and other pollutants. Together, these two thermal power plants have accounted for more than 95% of the country's total reported sulfur dioxide emissions.

**40 %+**

of coal in total domestic electricity production

**95 %+**

of reported sulfur dioxide emissions come from the of Thermal Power Plant (TPP) Bitola (part of “REK Bitola”) and TPP Oslomej

This has a negative impact on air quality and the health of the local population, while mining activity around “REK Bitola” creates serious environmental and health risks, including environmental degradation and increased rates of respiratory disease.

Decarbonization will inevitably place a strong and uneven burden on local communities. The transformation of “REK Bitola”, the phased closure of TPP Bitola, the revitalization of the mines, and the integration of innovative green technologies are firmly set out in national documents. The integration of renewable energy technologies (solar and wind) and innovative technologies to modernize “REK Bitola” will therefore help reduce harmful gas emissions and improve air quality, while also creating new opportunities for socio-economic development. Adhering to the principles of a just energy transition is essential, ensuring that the changes do not undermine the socio-economic situation of local communities, that is, the quality of life, particularly for the workers and families who depend on employment at the mining and energy complex “REK Bitola”.



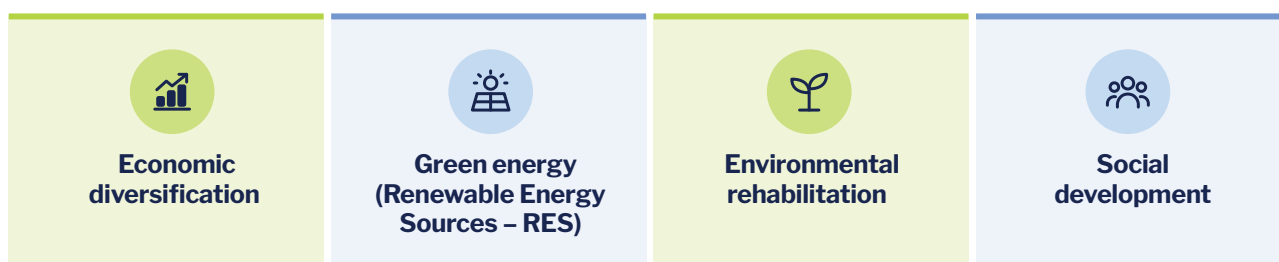
2. Legal and Institutional Framework Relevant to the „REK Bitola” and the Just Transition

At the national level, key policy documents, such as the Strategy for the Development of Energy in the Republic of North Macedonia up to 2040 and the Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP), outline a shared vision for sustainable development and energy efficiency. These frameworks aim to increase the share of renewable energy sources (RES) and gradually phase out fossil fuels at the Bitola and Oslomej thermal power plants, all while actively engaging key stakeholders. The sections addressing the transformation of “REK Bitola” and increased RES integration were reviewed. Under the national Energy Strategy, the “Green Scenario” for REK Bitola proposes ending coal-fired operations at TPP Bitola, replacing them with a mix of new RES capacity, natural gas, and energy imports. Additionally, an alternative transformation approach involves repurposing the existing infrastructure, site, and transmission grid, along with the current workforce, to construct a large-scale photovoltaic power plant.

The Just Transition Roadmap (JTR) serves as the country's leading document for a just transition, having been adopted in June 2023. The roadmap establishes the institutional framework required to coordinate and implement just transition activities. Within this framework, integrated models have been developed for shifting “REK Bitola” away from coal and toward renewable energy sources. This comprehensive approach encompasses the modernization of existing energy facilities, the integration of new renewable energy capacities, and socioeconomic support for the local community. The outlined programs provide for the gradual transformation of “REK Bitola” alongside the implementation of measures for worker compensation and retraining. Additionally, the associated projects for building new renewable energy infrastructure will help create green jobs.



The document identifies key needs and projects across four pillars:



The just transition process is implemented through a clearly defined governance and institutional framework, ensuring coordination among line ministries, public institutions, local governments, international partners, and stakeholders.



THE INVESTMENT PLATFORM

The Just Energy Transition Investment Platform serves as a central framework for:

- Coordinating public and private investments
- Aligning technical assistance and donor support
- Developing and monitoring a priority project pipeline

The platform enables regular coordination with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the World Bank, and other partners to prepare and implement projects that meet the standards of international financial institutions.



THE JUST TRANSITION COUNCIL

The Just Transition Council has been established as a strategic inter-ministerial body that provides:

- Political decision-making and oversight of the process
- Harmonization of sectoral policies
- Monitoring of progress in implementing the Just Transition Roadmap (JTR)



THEMATIC WORKING GROUPS

Thematic working groups have been established within the process:

- Working Group for Renewable Energy Sources and Storage Facilities
- Working Group for Economic Transition
- Working Group for Retraining and Training

The working groups play an operational role in identifying barriers, preparing projects and activities, and proposing implementation measures



2.1. Annual Implementation Plan for the Just Transition (2026)

National-level activities are guided by the **2026 Annual Implementation Plan**, which is built upon the priorities outlined in the Roadmap. This plan operationalizes measures divided across **four key pillars**:

Implementation Pillar	Main Focus and Planned Activities in 2026
 (1) Green Energy Transition	Accelerating renewable energy source (RES) projects, upgrading distribution and transmission grids in affected regions, and harmonizing regulations (e.g., regarding storage facilities, grid codes, etc.).
 (2) Economic Transition	Attracting investments and fostering new economic activities by upgrading industrial zones, creating incentives, and providing direct support to businesses.
 (3) Green and Smart Infrastructure	Improving municipal infrastructure (water supply and waste management) with a focus on the sustainable use of land and natural resources in the region
 (4) Skills and Human Capital Development	Retraining and upskilling the existing workforce, introducing apprenticeship and career counseling programs, with the ultimate goal of leaving no one behind.



3. Local Strategic Framework for Socio-Economic Development

The development of the Pelagonia region is closely tied to the implementation of projects and programs directly related to the just energy transition and the transformation of the “REK Bitola” power plant. This presents significant opportunities for energy and socioeconomic development, laying the groundwork for a sustainable future. Integrated into national energy and climate strategies, plans, and local development strategies, these projects boost economic activity and energy efficiency while advancing gender equality, alongside a fair and inclusive energy transition.

According to the Municipality of Bitola's Local Economic Development Strategy, strategic goals through 2027 also include improving infrastructure, fostering a favorable business climate, attracting new investments, and developing cultural and tourism potential, with a strong focus on supporting gasification, district heating, and educational sector projects.

Education and training play a pivotal role in this process. Developing training programs focused on new technologies and renewable energy sources will equip workers for the demands of the evolving job market. Collaboration between educational institutions and industry is vital to ensure a skilled workforce capable of meeting the needs of emerging industries. Supporting small family businesses in organic agriculture, dairy production, and beekeeping, coupled with workforce retraining for green jobs, will drive economic growth and community sustainability.

In this regard, the document "Vision for the Development of Bitola," produced by Eko-Svest, is particularly significant. It synthesizes research, meetings, stakeholder consultations, and awareness-raising efforts, alongside an analysis of national documents and sustainable development plans in the Republic of North Macedonia, with a specific focus on the coal-dependent Bitola region. The document proposes a roadmap for transforming Bitola into a region centered on sustainable energy development and environmental protection, fully aligned with international agreements and national sustainable development frameworks. Careful planning and innovative solutions will yield long-term benefits for the region and all stakeholders—ensuring social stability, reducing pollution, and unlocking new economic opportunities as part of a just transition to renewable energy.



4. About the „Voices of Just Transition” Project

04

The transition is a complex process that demands the involvement of all stakeholders and a coordinated effort from every party engaged, ensuring that the shift toward sustainable energy is effective, equitable, and beneficial for all interested actors in the region.

Accordingly, in response to the need to involve local communities, the Youth Cultural Center – Bitola (MKC – Bitola) has directed its long-standing commitment toward systematically building the capacities of local actors in the municipalities of Bitola, Novaci, Mogila, and Demir Hisar.

These activities are carried out within the framework of the project "Voices of Just Transition," funded by the European Commission and supported as a sub-grant through the Belgrade Open School (BOS) in partnership with the Center for Research and Information on the Environment "Eko-svest" from Skopje, as part of the broader regional project "Green Agenda Roadmap – Empowering Civil Society to Support the Development of Climate-Neutral and Resilient Economies in the Western Balkans."

The primary goal of the project was to empower civil society and vulnerable groups in the Bitola region (particularly youth, women, and workers affected by the decarbonization of "REK Bitola") to actively participate in and shape a fair, inclusive, and equitable energy transition, ensuring their voices are properly reflected in decision-making processes at both local and national levels.

Throughout the project, a series of four structured "Learning Circles" and four thematic workshops were conducted in the municipalities of Mogila, Novaci, Bitola, and Demir Hisar. The aim was to build capacity among local actors for active engagement in the energy transition and decarbonization process.





Through these activities, using interactive methods such as participatory mapping and scenario planning, the following results were successfully achieved:

- Mobilizing over 130 participants from a wide spectrum of sectors—ranging from the energy giant “REK Bitola” and public enterprises, through the educational system and the private sector, all the way to civil society organizations and local activists.
- Identifying specific challenges and opportunities: Each municipality contributed a unique perspective, moving from social cohesion in Mogila and industrial transformation in Novaci, to administrative and trade union dynamics in Bitola, and alternative economic potential in Demir Hisar.



5. Findings from the „Learning Circles”

As part of the project, a process of awareness-raising, learning, and dialogue was carried out through the so-called "Learning Circles" implemented across the municipalities of the Pelagonia region. This process created a platform for open dialogue, an exchange of experiences, and a joint identification of challenges and opportunities related to the just energy transition. Through the active participation of different stakeholders, valuable insights and recommendations were gathered, serving as a foundation for defining future priorities and advocacy measures.

Through the mobilization phase of the Learning Circles, which brought together over 90 participants from “REK Bitola”, public enterprises, the business sector, education, and civil society, the specific challenges and potential of each municipality in the Pelagonia region were successfully mapped. The discussions showed the need for a balanced approach addressing the industrial transformation in Novaci, social cohesion in Mogila, administrative dynamics in Bitola, and alternative economic potential in Demir Hisar. In response to these distinct characteristics, three key pillars for future advocacy have been defined, offering systemic solutions at both the local and regional levels.



Institutionalization of Regional Dialogue

RECOMMENDATION: Establish a dedicated body to act as a bridge between local government, “REK Bitola”, and the central authorities, ensuring transparency and accountability in decision-making. This body could take the form of the local economic and social council (LESC) in Bitola.



Regional Center for Green Skills

RECOMMENDATION: Create a collaborative platform bridging regional schools and the private sector for workforce retraining, working in tandem with the regional education hub (the Technical Vocational High School). This serves as a vital safeguard against the social exclusion of workers who will be impacted by the phasing out of coal-fired facilities.



Social Justice and Inclusion

RECOMMENDATION: Ensure the active participation of civil society organizations across all municipalities in the decision-making process to guarantee that the voices of women, youth, and vulnerable groups are properly represented.

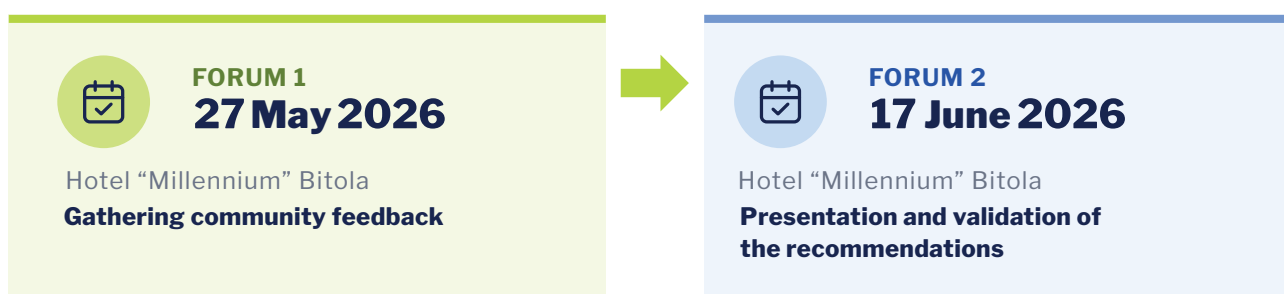


6. Consultations and Validation of Community Recommendations

Throughout May and June 2026, YCC – Bitola implemented the "Voices of Just Transition" forum process as a mechanism to engage the local community in shaping recommendations for a just energy transition in the Pelagonia region. The forum process was designed to provide a structured and inclusive space for dialogue among citizens, local government representatives, institutions, "REK Bitola", the business sector, trade unions, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders.

The primary objective of the process was to systematically gather, analyze, and validate the community's perspectives, needs, and recommendations regarding the energy transition, workforce retraining, economic diversification, and local development. Special emphasis was placed on identifying potential social, economic, and environmental consequences of the transformation of "REK Bitola", as well as the opportunities brought by the green and just transition process for the municipalities in the Pelagonia region.

The forum process was organized into two consecutive sessions, allowing for the gradual development of recommendations and their subsequent validation by a broader circle of stakeholders.



The first forum was dedicated to gathering community voices and creating a platform for open discussion regarding the challenges, risks, and opportunities associated with the just transition. Participants had the opportunity to share their experiences, expectations, and proposals, with discussions aimed at formulating concrete recommendations to be submitted to competent institutions and integrated into future local, regional, and national policies.



Specifically, the objectives of the first forum were to:

- Spark a constructive and inclusive discussion on the real challenges and opportunities brought by the energy transition process
- Identify the key concerns of the local community regarding the future of REK Bitola, jobs, and the socio-economic impacts of the gradual phase-out of coal.
- Address the needs for retraining, acquiring new skills, and securing appropriate support measures for workers, youth, and other vulnerable groups.
- Discuss opportunities for economic diversification, the creation of green jobs, attracting investments, and fostering local entrepreneurship.
- Identify priority measures and policies that will contribute to a fair, inclusive, and sustainable transition.
- Formulate initial recommendations based on the needs and priorities of the local community.

The second forum served as the validation and consultative phase of the process. At this meeting, the findings and recommendations emerging from the first forum were presented, giving participants the opportunity to further analyze, supplement, and prioritize the proposed measures. The goal was to secure the broadest possible consensus around key priorities and confirm that the final recommendations reflect the real needs and expectations of the community.

Specifically, the second forum aimed to:

- Present and elaborate on the findings and recommendations derived from the first forum.
- Gather additional comments, suggestions, and proposals from a wider circle of stakeholders.
- Confirm, revise, and prioritize the proposed recommendations through collaborative discussion.
- Foster a sense of shared action and responsibility for future activities related to the just transition.
- Secure a final set of recommendations to be submitted to relevant institutions, serving as a foundation for future policies, strategies, and local action plans concerning the just energy transition in the Pelagonia region.



Through this two-tiered forum approach, a transparent, participatory, and inclusive process for crafting recommendations was ensured, where the views of the local community were not only recorded but also validated and aligned with a broader circle of relevant actors. Consequently, the forum process helped strengthen local dialogue, build trust among stakeholders, and develop recommendations carrying greater legitimacy and potential for future institutional review and implementation.

6.1. First Forum – Gathering Community Opinions on the Just Transition

On May 27, 2026, the first "Voices for a Just Transition" Forum was held at the Millennium Hotel in Bitola, aiming to provide an open and inclusive space for dialogue regarding the challenges and opportunities brought by the just energy transition in the Pelagonia region. The forum facilitated the collection of community opinions, viewpoints, and proposals, as well as the collaborative formulation of recommendations to be submitted to relevant institutions. These will serve as a foundation for future planning and policy-making related to the energy transition, workforce retraining, and local development.

The event brought together representatives from:

- “REK Bitola”
- Civil society organizations
- Educational institutions and the business sector
- Local governments from the four target municipalities (Bitola, Novaci, Mogila, and Demir Hisar)

The work of the forum was organized through interactive discussions and group sessions, allowing participants to share their experiences, identify key challenges, and propose concrete solutions.

The discussions and activities were structured around **three core thematic areas**:

Thematic area	Key Questions and Discussion Focus
 1. Energy Transition	What are the community's expectations and concerns regarding the closure of “REK Bitola” and the shift toward renewable energy sources?



Thematic area	Key Questions and Discussion Focus
 2. Retraining and employment	Which skills and training programs are most urgently needed? How can current workers and youth in the region be systematically supported?
 3. Local economic development	What are the realistic opportunities for developing new industries, attracting investments, and creating sustainable green jobs?



Thematic Area 1 – Energy Transition

What are the community's expectations and concerns regarding the closure of “REK Bitola” and the shift toward renewables?

The "Energy Transition" session focused on the expectations, challenges, and concerns of the local community regarding the gradual closure of “REK Bitola” and the transition to renewable energy sources. Participants discussed the potential economic, social, and educational impacts of the transition, as well as the measures needed to ensure a fair and gradual shift without severe negative effects on the local economy and employment.

The discussion identified the following key challenges and proposed solutions:



Challenges

The closure of the mines will reduce the demand for specific professional profiles, particularly mining engineers. Participants noted that while the state has already invested in their education, additional funding will be required in the future for their retraining and adjustment to new labor market demands.

The depletion of available coal reserves and the gradual reduction of its share in electricity generation create a pressing need for reliable alternative energy sources.



Proposed Solutions

Establish a regional retraining and adult education center within the Technical High School in Bitola to provide modern programs for acquiring new skills and professions.

Diversify energy sources through the development of transitional technologies, the drafting of a feasibility study for a gas-fired power plant, and accelerated investment in photovoltaic capacity.



Challenges

The closure of the mines directly threatens small and medium-sized enterprises (subcontractors, logistics, maintenance, and ancillary services) that depend entirely on mining operations.



Proposed Solutions

Implement social packages and economic incentives, including social protection measures such as service top-ups for early retirement for older workers.

The discussion revealed that while the community recognizes the necessity of the energy transition, it expects the process to be carefully planned, featuring clear mechanisms to protect workers, support the local economy, and proactively prepare human resources for the evolving job market. Participants emphasized that a just transition should not be reduced merely to a technological shift; rather, it must serve as a comprehensive socio-economic process that unlocks new development opportunities for the region.



Thematic Area 2 – Retraining and Employment

Which skills and training programs are most needed? How can workers and youth be supported?

Under the "Retraining and Employment" theme, participants discussed the need to prepare the workforce in a timely manner for the just transition. Special attention was paid to the demand for new knowledge and skills, upgrading the retraining system, aligning education with labor market needs, and creating conditions to retain youth and skilled workers in the region.

The discussion stressed that a successful transition depends not only on creating new jobs, but also on proactive planning for workforce transfer, strengthening institutional coordination, and investing in human capital as a prerequisite for long-term local development.



Challenges

Internal imbalance and a shortage of qualified labor. “REK Bitola” faces a severe structural imbalance i.e. certain departments are overstaffed, while other critical positions lack suitable personnel. Additionally, a broader regional deficit of skilled and qualified labor ready for modern industries has been observed.

Insufficient coordination among institutions, the educational system, and the business sector creates a gap between the profiles of displaced workers and the needs of new investors.

Poor connections and the public services that have been centralized. Inadequate road infrastructure isolates the smaller municipalities of Mogila, Novaci, and Demir Hisar. Due to a lack of public services in these rural areas, citizens rely entirely on the Municipality of Bitola, increasing pressure on the city while stunting the surrounding towns.

A lack of social infrastructure, such as kindergartens, schools, and healthcare services, combined with transition-related uncertainty, drives youth migration and diminishes the region's appeal for living and working.

The loss of long-term jobs at REK causes serious social and psychological stress, anxiety, and existential fear among individuals and their families.



Proposed Solutions

Proactively plan workforce transfers by upskilling employees for emerging sectors (green energy, modern agriculture, regional waste management). In parallel, offer competitive wages and better working conditions to retain experienced staff.

Establish a Research and Advisory Business Center. This body will act as a vital bridge to map market needs, create targeted retraining programs, and directly connect REK workers with emerging industries (such as the future Regional Waste Management Center). Retraining programs must be tailored to real labor market demands, featuring practical training and measurable outcomes rather than serving as mere formal compliance.

Reallocate a portion of the Green Transition Investment Fund to build new industrial zones directly within rural municipalities. This entails economic development alongside parallel investments in organized public transport alternatives for commuters from these settlements.

Mandate that new industrial investments be accompanied by the development of social infrastructure and public services to improve living standards, retain youth, and ensure sustainable local development.

Establish social and psychological support teams to provide continuous assistance to families undergoing transition. For these measures to be effective, communication and cooperation between line ministries and local government must be harmonized.



Discussions within this thematic area highlighted that retraining should not be treated as an isolated measure, but rather as part of a broader human capital development strategy. Targeted retraining programs must align with real labor market needs, incorporating practical training and measurable outcomes rather than merely fulfilling formal requirements. Participants concluded that a successful just transition requires close coordination among institutions, the education system, private enterprise, and local governments to proactively match workforce skills with future market demands. At the same time, retaining youth and skilled talent will depend not only on employment opportunities, but also on securing high-quality living standards, social security, and long-term developmental prospects in the region



Thematic Area 3 – Local Economic Development

What are the opportunities for new industries, investments, and green jobs?

Under the "Local Economic Development" theme, participants discussed opportunities for the economic diversification of the Pelagonia region following the gradual wind-down of operations at "REK Bitola". The discussion focused on identifying new development avenues, attracting investments, creating green jobs, and establishing conditions for sustainable economic growth that will mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the energy transition.

Participants emphasized that successful local economic development requires proactive planning, a transparent decision-making process, and robust institutional coordination. It was stressed that the transition should be leveraged as an opportunity to transform the regional economy rather than being viewed merely as a process of shuttering existing industrial capacities.



Challenges

The ongoing trend of youth emigration further diminishes the region's development potential and limits the availability of a qualified workforce.



Proposed Solutions

Plan a gradual and well-managed transition that allows sufficient time to create new jobs, attract investments, and retain youth in the region.



 Challenges	 Proposed Solutions
The age structure of the workforce at “REK Bitola” presents a serious challenge: with an average age of 55, workers are often considered too old for retraining yet too young for retirement.	Involve “REK Bitola”’s human resources department directly throughout the transition process to formulate social plans, supplementary training programs, and service buyback measures for workers nearing retirement.
A lack of transparency and clear information creates uncertainty among workers, local companies, and citizens regarding the timeline and dynamics of the transition.	Draft and publicly release a comprehensive just transition strategy with clearly defined goals, deadlines, responsible entities, and regular public communication mechanisms.
There is a lack of systematic labor market analyses to identify deficit occupations and the future needs of the economy.	Conduct ongoing labor market analyses and develop training and retraining programs aligned with the actual needs of new industries and investors.
Experiences from countries like Greece, Spain, and Germany show that poorly planned transitions can lead to youth migration, the closure of local businesses, and the economic decline of entire regions..	Develop new economic alternatives through investments in renewable energy, the IT sector, modern agriculture, the circular economy, and other sustainable industries. Additionally, it was proposed that certain existing energy assets be temporarily maintained as a "cold reserve" to cushion economic fallout and prevent abrupt shocks to the local economy.

The discussion demonstrated that the economic transformation of the Pelagonia region must be strategically planned and closely tied to human capital development, investment attraction, and local infrastructure improvements. Participants underscored that a just transition will only succeed if the reduction of coal dependency is mirrored by the creation of new opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship, and sustainable economic growth. Furthermore, the need for the process to be transparent, predictable, and anchored in a long-term vision with the active participation of all relevant stakeholders was strongly highlighted.

At the conclusion of the **first forum**, participants identified key priority interventions deemed essential for successfully managing the just transition process:

1

Drafting and publicizing a clear transition strategy, featuring precisely defined goals, activities, responsible entities, and timelines to reduce uncertainty among employees, the local population, and other stakeholders.



2

Diversifying energy sources and introducing transitional technologies, through the preparation of a feasibility study for constructing a gas-fired power plant, alongside the development of solar photovoltaic power plants and other renewable energy sources to ensure a secure and sustainable electricity supply.

3

Conducting regular labor market analyses and developing training and retraining programs aligned with the actual needs of emerging industries, incorporating practical training and measurable outcomes. Proactively planning workforce transformation through upskilling and retraining programs targeted at high-potential future sectors, such as renewable energy, modern and sustainable agriculture, the circular economy, and regional waste management.

6.2. Second Forum – Presentation and Validation of Community Recommendations

To ensure that the recommendations derived from the first forum were presented, expanded upon, validated, and prioritized by the community itself, a second forum session titled "Presentation and Validation of Community Recommendations" was held on June 17, 2026.

The second forum showcased findings and recommendations from the first session across each area of interest, prompting discussion, feedback, additions, and proposals from participants.

Much like the first forum, the thematic presentations were followed by breakout group sessions, where participants confirmed, elaborated on, and added on the initial recommendations with concrete proposals.



Thematic Area 1 – Energy Transition

Participants reaffirmed the necessity of transitioning from coal to renewable energy sources and proposed several specific implementation paths. Recommendations included utilizing depleted mines and open pits for energy storage, alongside addressing grid stability issues associated with the installation of large-scale solar capacities. Additionally, emphasis was placed on leveraging existing infrastructure and exploring hydrogen production potential. Building a gas-fired power plant, managing waste, landfills, and organic waste, and deploying battery energy storage systems were all confirmed as viable supplementary options.



Thematic Area 2 – Retraining, Employment, and Skill Development

Under this theme, participants proposed conducting research into attractive fields for "green" retraining. Specific examples highlighted included furniture upcycling and restoration, waste recycling and management, and launching small-scale composting facilities.

The need for a detailed human capital audit was underscored, focusing on profiling the workforce required for the gas-fired power plant and mapping employees by education, age, qualifications, and work experience. It was also suggested to activate the beneficiaries of extended service tenure (beneficiaries of counted service) for eligible categories of REK workers. The group concluded that the transition is an undeniable reality, necessitating a serious and proactive approach toward the workforce.

Participants further highlighted the need for retraining and support tailored to redundant workers as a particularly vulnerable demographic. The recommendation to update technical school curricula to align with the needs of the green transition was also reaffirmed, ensuring that future generations acquire market-relevant skills.



Thematic Area 3 – Local Economic Development and Green Jobs

Regarding local economic development, participants pointed out that existing support programs for green businesses are already in place and recommended their continuation and expansion as a concrete mechanism for government and donor-driven support to generate new, sustainable economic activity in the region.

6.3. Final Validated Community Recommendations

Based on the discussions, group work, and validation carried out across both forums, the following consolidated community recommendations have emerged:



Thematic area



1. Energy transition

Final Validated Community Recommendations

- Accelerate the development of **photovoltaic capacities** in accordance with feasibility study findings and the capabilities of the local and regional power grid.
- Utilize depleted mines and other existing infrastructure for **energy storage**, while simultaneously addressing grid stability and capacity challenges during the integration of large-scale PV capacities.
- Develop **battery systems and other energy storage technologies** to better balance renewable energy generation.
- Foster **decentralized electricity generation** through PV systems on households, public buildings, companies, and other local sites.
- Capitalize on opportunities to establish and develop **energy communities**, in line with new legislative frameworks for renewable energy sources (RES)
- Leverage existing infrastructure and explore opportunities for hydrogen production and utilization as part of long-term clean energy development.
- Provide timely and transparent information to the public regarding the construction of the regional waste management center, clearly communicating its potential for creating new jobs and developing local supplier networks.



2. Retraining, Employment, and Human Capital Development

- Establish a team and methodology to conduct a detailed analysis and mapping of human capital at “REK Bitola” based on education, age, qualifications, and work experience.
- Support the established regional retraining and advisory center within the Technical High School, providing training, career counseling, and labor market insights
- Update technical school curricula to meet the demands of the green transition, particularly in PV technology, electrical engineering, energy storage, energy efficiency, recycling, and waste management.
- Establish a Research and Advisory Business Center as a vital link for mapping market needs, designing targeted retraining programs with practical training and measurable outcomes.
- Directly connect the workers of “REK Bitola”, especially those facing redundancy, with new industrial and green facilities, including the upcoming Regional Waste Management Center.



Thematic area	Final Validated Community Recommendations
	• Conduct surveys and research to gauge workforce interest in retraining for attractive "green" fields, such as furniture upcycling/restoration, waste recycling and management, and small-scale composting facilities • Allocate a portion of the Green Transition Investment Fund toward building and equipping new industrial zones in rural municipalities, alongside alternative solutions for organized public transport for commuters from these settlements • Activate extended service tenure (counted service) for eligible categories of "REK Bitola" workers and safeguard existing capacity through a "cold reserve" concept. • Define the requisite worker profiles for future energy and green installations to proactively align training programs and timelines with the pace of the transition.
 3. Local Economic Development and Green Jobs	• Continue and expand upon existing support programs for green businesses. • Reallocate a portion of the Green Transition Investment Fund toward developing and equipping industrial zones in rural municipalities. • Support local companies and new businesses that can integrate into supply chains linked to PV systems, energy storage, energy efficiency, waste management, and other green sectors. • Develop alternative public transport solutions and improve access to healthcare, social, and cultural services, particularly in rural areas. • Establish social and psychological support teams for workers and families affected by the transition.

6.4. Cross-Sectoral and Institutional Recommendations

- ☑ Establish or strengthen a local coordination mechanism for the just transition process, involving local governments, institutions, workers, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and the business sector.
- ☑ Draft a clear strategy featuring concrete goals, deadlines, and monitoring mechanisms for implementing these recommendations, serving as **a direct contribution to the Territorial Just Transition Plan**.
- ☑ Ensure timely, accurate, and accessible public information regarding all major infrastructure and investment projects tied to the transition.
- ☑ Maintain ongoing community engagement through follow-up forums, consultations, and validation processes, building upon the framework of the completed forum process.



7. Alignment of Forum Findings with Key National and Local Strategic Frameworks

The "Voices of Just Transition" forum process accurately reflects the genuine needs of the local population in the Pelagonia region, establishing direct synergy with existing national and local strategic frameworks. Through three core areas, grassroots demands are directly aligned with broader strategic goals

	1. Green Energy Transition and Decarbonization
 National Level	Community demands for source diversification, the development of photovoltaic capacities, a gas-fired power plant, and energy storage systems fully align with the Green Scenario of the Energy Development Strategy until 2040 and the National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP). These documents already outline the gradual phase-out of REK Bitola and the repurposing of its infrastructure for renewable energy sources (RES).
 Local Level	Forum initiatives mirror the "Vision for the Development of Bitola" document produced by Eko-Svest, which provides a concrete roadmap for transforming the Bitola region into an environmentally sustainable area, contributing to reduced emissions and improved air quality.



2. Retraining and Human Capital Development



National Level

The necessity of mapping REK Bitola's workforce, supporting the established regional retraining center within the Technical High School, and providing advisory support for green skills directly address Pillar 4 of the 2026 Annual Implementation Plan for Just Transition – Skills and Human Capital Development. This pillar is explicitly designed for workforce retraining and career counseling to ensure no one is left behind.



Local Level

Forum recommendations to adapt technical school curricula and foster collaboration between the educational sector and industry tie directly into the Municipality of Bitola's **Local Economic Development Strategy through 2027**, which prioritizes educational development and workforce preparation for evolving market conditions.



3. Local Economic Development and Social Equity



National Level

Calls for support for green businesses, investments in new industrial zones across rural municipalities (Mogila, Novaci, and Demir Hisar), and the introduction of social packages for older workers reflect **Pillar 2 (Economic Transition) and Pillar 3 (Green and Smart Infrastructure)** of the 2026 national plan, as well as the main economic diversification and social development pillars of the Just Transition Roadmap (JTR).



Local Level

Recommendations regarding social infrastructure development (kindergartens, public transit, healthcare services) to stem youth emigration run in parallel with municipal objectives to improve communal infrastructure, attract investments, and support small family businesses in rural areas.

Cross-Sectoral Coordination

A particularly vital contribution is the forum recommendation to establish a **local coordination mechanism**—such as through the Local Economic and Social Council (LESC) of Bitola or a similar body—backed by ongoing regional dialogue. Such a mechanism would bridge national policies with the real needs and challenges of the local community, driving the efficient implementation of just transition principles.



To achieve this, **cooperation and coordination must be strengthened between the thematic working groups of the Just Transition Council, the LESC, and the local community.** These working groups should maintain a stronger, regular local presence by participating in LESC sessions, holding direct meetings with local actors, and consistently informing and consulting citizens and vulnerable groups. In doing so, grassroots insights, needs, and proposals can be relayed upward in a timely manner, allowing national policies and measures to be tailored to on-the-ground realities.

Establishing this two-way communication and coordination will **embed local needs directly into the plan and execution of just transition policies,** including the **Territorial Just Transition Plan,** transforming stakeholder involvement from periodic consultations into active, continuous co-creation.



Bibliography

National Energy and Climate Plan of the Republic of North Macedonia (NECP) 2025–2030, Ministry of Energy, Mining, and Mineral Resources [Национален план за енергија и клима на Република Северна Македонија (НПЕК) 2025-2030, Министерство за енергетика, рударство и минерални сировини]

Energy Development Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia until 2040, Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (2019)[Стратегија за развој на енергетиката во Република Северна Македонија до 2040 година, Влада на Република Северна Македонија (2019)]

Annual Just Transition Implementation Plan 2026, Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Energy, Mining, and Mineral Resources, December 2025 [Годишен План за Имплементација на Праведната Транзиција 2026, Влада на Република Северна Македонија, Министерство за енергетика, рударство и минерални сировини, декември 2025]

Local Economic Development Strategy of the Municipality of Bitola for the Period 2023–2027 [Стратегија за локален економски развој на општина Битола за периодот 2023 - 2027]

"Vision for the Development of Bitola," Center for Research and Information on the Environment "Eko-svest," 2024 [„Визија за развој на Битола“, Центар за истражување и информирање за животната средина „Еко-свест“, 2024]

Summary Report "Learning Circles" – Pelagonia Region, MKC Bitola 2026 [Сумарен извештај „Кругови на учење“ – Пелагониски регион, МКЦ Битола 2026]

