

INDUSTRIAL LEGACY, GREEN TRANSITION AND THE CHALLENGES OF DECARBONIZATION: THE CASE OF “PRAHOVA COUNTY” IN THE EU JUST TRANSITION FUND: AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH WITH INSIGHTS

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Abstract: The transition to a green economy is particularly difficult for regions whose economies rely heavily on polluting resources, especially coal, oil, or heavy industry. A shift in these sectors can lead to local economic collapse. By anticipating these problems, the European Union proposed the Just Transition Mechanism that aims to mitigate the negative effects of a green transition on employment by financing the diversification and modernization of local economies and by encouraging employees to work in new sectors and industries. In Romania, six counties benefit from this fund, including “Prahova”, a heavily industrialized area with a long tradition of fossil fuel use, which continues to generate significant revenues for local budgets. In this context, the main objective of the paper is to empirically assess the degree of economic vulnerability of the county to the transition to climate neutrality, by determining regional dependence and specialization in high-carbon sectors, using the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) and Location Quotient (LQ) indicators. The topic is a timely one, with numerous studies focused on the application of the framework for a just transition in coal regions. However, what is missing is a quantitative assessment of the risks and challenges faced by regions with a developed oil and gas sector, such as Prahova. The results show that the region is still heavily industrialized with high-carbon enterprises, Nevertheless, important steps have been made towards the green transition, and the authorities recognize carbon exposure as a real problem and continue to focus on solutions to limit it.

Keywords: Challenges, Decarbonization, Just Transition, LQ, HHI, EU funds, sustainability, globalization.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE REGION

1.1. Introduction

Climate change is an increasingly pressing threat to modern society. The European Union (EU) launched a major energy transition strategy in 2018, shifting its focus from fossil fuels to renewable and green energy sources. Nevertheless, a shift of this magnitude is problematic depending on the climate action taken by countries. To this end, the Just

Transition Fund (JTF) was proposed by the European Commission (EC) in 2020 to address the challenges that come with a transition. It acts as a financial safety net and provides financial support for a just and socially equitable transition. (Moesker and Pesch, 2022)

The budgetary allocation targets and the guidelines set by the EC must lead to substantial changes in societal norms, in addition to replacing one economic model with another. The ultimate goal is to orient society toward a predetermined model in which communities welcome future changes as opportunities for regeneration and prosperity. (Campbell and Coenen, 2017).

Also, according to Jourde and Widuto (2021), the JTF will have a budget of EUR 17.5 billion, and Member States receive funding based on the following key standards: (1) the quantities of greenhouse gas emissions in high-carbon intensity areas; (2) the employment levels in high-carbon enterprises in these areas; and (3) the employability of the coal and lignite mining sector are all factors.

Funding is available to all Member States, but resources are prioritized in areas with the most pressing problems.

However, the Paris Agreement made it clear that local conditions are largely responsible for the effectiveness of the initiatives financed by the JTF. Moreover, no matter how noble the political rhetoric may seem “promising that no one will be left behind”, the success of a just transition will depend on the potential of each community to act. Local resources determine community resilience, which relies significantly on the participation of community members. (Nicola and Schmitz, 2022)

The European Commission (2019) has emphasized that the decarbonization process will require significant long-term productive diversification for regions of the European Union where the local economy is heavily dependent on the fossil fuel industry (lignite, peat, coal, shale gas), as well as an immediate solution to the problem of thousands of people who will face unemployment in the coming years.

The Just Transition Fund will provide €2.14 billion to Romania to help it transition to a greener economy. The fund will focus on the most affected areas and help Romania meet its commitment to phase out coal by 2032.

In Romania, six counties: Dolj, Galați, Gorj, Hunedoara, Mureș and Prahova will receive the funds. In two of these, Gorj and Hunedoara, mainly in the Jiu Valley, there are still operating coal mines, while Dolj, Galați, Prahova and Mureș have carbon-intensive businesses and use coal-based energy for heating.

In this paper, we focus on the positive and negative aspects of the transition to a green economy in the Prahova region, a highly industrialized county in Romania. Prahova is a county with a long history of fossil fuel use, which continues to bring a profitable business and a considerable revenue for local budgets. However, the region is aware that carbon exposure is a real problem and continues to focus on solutions to limit carbon exposure.

In this context, the main objective of the paper is to empirically assess the degree of economic vulnerability of Prahova County to the transition to climate neutrality by determining regional dependence and specialization in high carbon emitting sectors using the Herfindahl-Hirschman (HHI) and Location Quotient (LQ) indicators, thereby analyzing the necessity of the Just Transition Fund intervention.

The study differs from the specialized literature because to our knowledge, most of them focus on the Just Transition in coal regions where the main problem is the closure of mines and the need to find solutions for the retraining of the low-skilled workforce. Instead, we

focus on the decarbonization of the oil and gas industries, which present a different set of risks, specifically a financial one (the massive loss of revenue from taxation of large refineries) and the need to transfer advanced professional skills (engineers, technicians, etc.) to new sectors.

Analyzing this specific location can offer helpful guidance for the transition in other Romanian and EU regions with high carbon consumption.

1.2. A background about the region

Prahova IS still is the epicenter of Romania's oil industry, a tradition extending back over 150 years. The oil sector began with significant foreign investment and technology (German, British, Dutch, and American capital). Prahova was Europe's principal supply of oil during WWII, which is why the county (particularly Ploiești) was extensively bombarded. With the country's strong centrally planned industrialization agenda, the communist era that followed implied nationalization and tremendous expansion. The oil industry and its value chain, which used to be very powerful in Prahova, have been severely impacted by post-communism and the change to a market economy, with the high point of business closures and lay-offs occurring during the 2000s. Oil extraction machinery which is highly valued in world markets, the petrochemical industry, research, and engineering, and higher education institutions suffered.

To the delight and support of a community otherwise badly affected by harsh restructuring, the most competitive components of the oil sector have managed to survive and prosper in the decades after the tough economic transition to a market economy and openness to global markets. This is a history that must be examined as Prahova faces a new transition dilemma: the phase-out of fossil fuels. This is virtually a death sentence for what was and still is Prahova's backbone, identity, and pride, as well as its main metropolitan centers Ploiești and Câmpina. (Ciopi-Oprea, 2010)



Fig. 1. Location of the Prahova county in Romania.

Source: Authors' elaboration with MapChart.net

Prahova is a county in southern Romania with a population of 712,254 people, making it one of the most densely inhabited areas in Romania. Ploiești, one of Romania's secondary cities, is home to around 29% of Prahova's population.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Just Transition: from traditional models to industrial diversification

The transition to a green economy is particularly difficult for regions whose economies rely heavily on polluting resources, especially coal, oil, or heavy industry. A shift in these sectors can lead to local economic collapse. Anticipating these problems, the EU proposed the Just Transition Mechanism.

The European Parliament (2021) stressed that the JTF was created to support EU industries, regions, and workers facing this change. It aims to mitigate the negative effects of a green transition on employment by financing the diversification and modernization of local economies and by encouraging employees to work in new sectors and industries.

Although academic arguments about transition first emerged in the 2000s, the idea of a “just transition” has a rich history and has been used by activists, trade unionists, and related groups since the early 1970s. As the topic of a just transition from the current fossil fuel-based energy paradigm has gained more attention, scholars have developed a variety of understandings, definitions, and interpretations of the concept (Murafa, 2022).

Wang and Lo (2021) identify five themes around which just transition has been discussed: (1) Just transition as a comprehensive framework for justice; (2) Just transition as a concept with a focus on the workforce; (3) Just transition as an approach to socio-technical transformation; (4) Just transition as a public perspective; and (5) Just transition as an approach to governance. Overall, the paper indicates that just transition draws on rich theoretical and empirical knowledge from various fields, being not only an environmental issue, but also a social one.

The academic literature focuses mainly on the application of the just transition framework to coal regions. For example, in his paper, Śniegocki (2021) refers to the fact that the just transition process in the Silesian region of Poland (the largest mining region in the EU) is based on regional development and the restructuring of the mining sector (the gradual closure of coal mines). With the help of the Regional Operational Programme financed by the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, as well as the JTF, the Silesian economy has become more diversified. New sectors of the economy have developed, and the number of people employed in the mining sector has steadily decreased.

The JTF also supports the regions most affected by the closure of the Matra power plant in Hungary. The plant is powered by highly polluting lignite. According to Rosch & Epifanio (2022), the JTF supports workers in acquiring new skills to facilitate the transition to new jobs and, in addition, supports the creation of new firms.

In Romania, Nicola and Schmitz (2022) highlight in their paper the problems of governance and the lack of trust in local and national institutions, among other problems in implementing a just transition in the Jiu Valley, a coal mining region in Romania.

This approach is taken up by Ziouzos et al. (2021), who discuss measures taken to guarantee a just transition for households and businesses in the Western Macedonia area during the lignite phase-out process. Heffron and McCauley (2017) also provide an overview of just transition programs, and evidence shows that there are plans to phase

out the fossil fuel industry, starting with coal. Such a transition program will support the growth of low-carbon economies worldwide.

The most recent studies, which focus on assessing the impact of the Just Transition Fund, such as Hermwille et al. (2023), present the most vulnerable areas of the EU-27 that will experience massive job losses as a result of the coal phase-out. In addition, in 2022, a quantitative assessment of JTF plans based on 10 principles was developed for 13 regions in Europe. According to WWF, a just transition is more than just a change in technology, focusing also on protecting biodiversity (WWF-European Policy Office, 2022). Although there are numerous studies on regions that rely on high coal consumption, what is missing is a quantitative assessment of the risks and challenges faced by regions with a developed oil and gas sector in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Prahova.

2.2. Energy transition, AI, sustainability and globalization for markets and economies

The future energy transition will go on to progress slowly because of the high costs and the required installation efforts and equipment. Furthermore, it will be difficult and almost impossible to skip the most important energy resources that are oil and gas (Benabed and Boeru, 2023). Recycling the energy waste and the regeneration of energy resources needs new approaches in corporate awareness, marketing and strategies that can help the global economy move better towards sustainable globalization. Sustainable business appears significant for the economic sectors and the development of globalization (Benabed and Boeru, 2023).

Companies have to take into consideration the aspects of artificial intelligence (AI) no matter its area of competitiveness in foreign markets and business leadership. Moreover, AI could help companies and businesses to reach a certain level of leadership. Since globalization has presented various challenges to the world and its economies such as the various economic recessions that occur from time to time.

Moreover, the reality of inequality among economies creates a gap in business values. Today, the world faces the reality of thinking machines with programmed hardware or software that perform specific designed processes in shapes of artificial intelligence. Hence, artificial intelligence (AI) is the ability of a machine or virtual program to mimic intelligent behaviour. Companies need to rely on the creation of suitable resilience models to mitigate the expected and unexpected risks (Benabed, 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY

Adopting a quantitative methodology, this paper analyzes the degree of economic vulnerability of Prahova County to the transition to climate neutrality, by determining regional dependence and specialization in high-carbon sectors. Furthermore, the research also integrates various socio-economic indicators to provide a comprehensive overview of the regional context.

We started from two premises. First, Prahova is still among the most industrialized counties in Romania, and most local jobs are in the industrial sector, therefore, a transition to a green economy could lead to a decrease in incomes in the area, a high unemployment rate and internal migration, due to proximity to Bucharest. In this case, we use several indicators to assess the current socio-economic situation in the county such as the GDP growth rate, the structure of employment by sectors, the civilian employed population and the population by activities. The data were taken and processed by the authors from

official sources such as Eurostat and the National Institute of Statistics. These were calculated and centralized in Microsoft Excel to create tables and graphs that highlight socio-economic particularities at the county level and analyze trends.

We also calculated the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI), which is an important indicator to analyze in view of the transition to a green economy, as it shows how dependent a region is on a certain sector and more precisely how vulnerable it would be to this transition. In addition, the Location Quotient (LQ) allows the identification of dominant sectors at the county level by comparing the share of each sector in the total number of local employees with the share of the same sector at the national level.

Second, from the perspective of inclusion in “decline” or “transformation” branches, the decision is determined by both national and external impact strategies, given that all companies in Prahova are part of international groups. In this context, we identified the main sources of greenhouse gas emissions in Prahova and the measures taken by companies to transition to a green economy.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Socio-economic situation

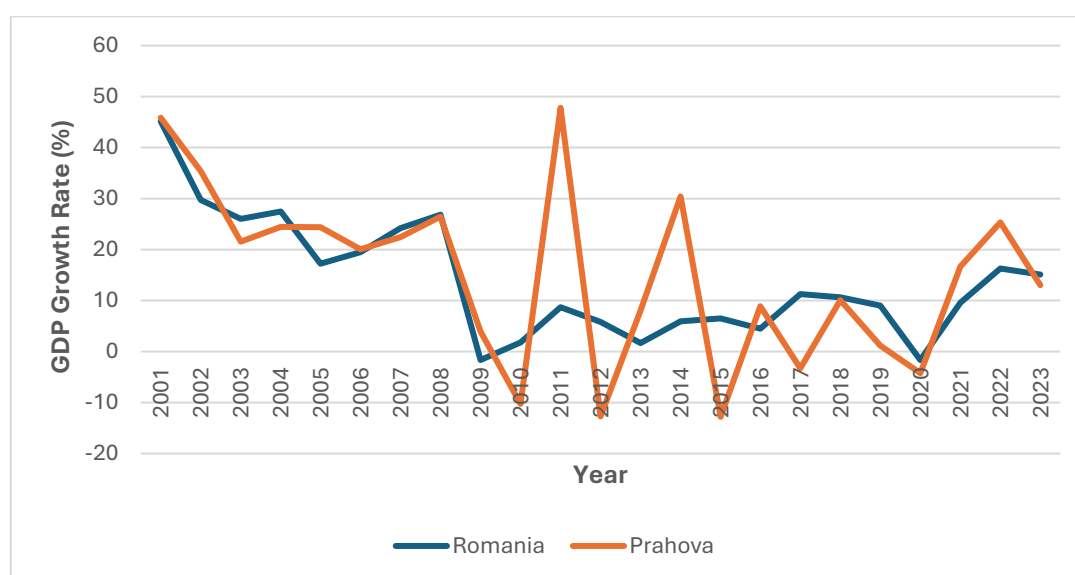


Fig. 2. The GDP growth rate in Prahova compared to the national trend (2001-2023)

Source: Authors' estimation based on Eurostat (nama_10r_3gdp) and national statistics data

The county contributes to the national economy with a fairly high local GDP, which represents a share of approximately 3.8% of the national GDP. Of the six counties that can apply for the Just Transition Fund, Prahova has the largest demographic and economic base. The local economy has varied substantially since the financial crisis of 2008-2009 and the COVID-19 health crisis of 2020. However, the county has recovered to an average growth rate higher than the national rate in recent years. (Figure 2)

The economy of the county and especially of the county seat, has been linked to oil refining and the production of equipment for the oil industry. Although these industries have undergone significant restructuring processes in recent decades, they still represent the main economic profile and activity, as can be seen in the figures and table below:

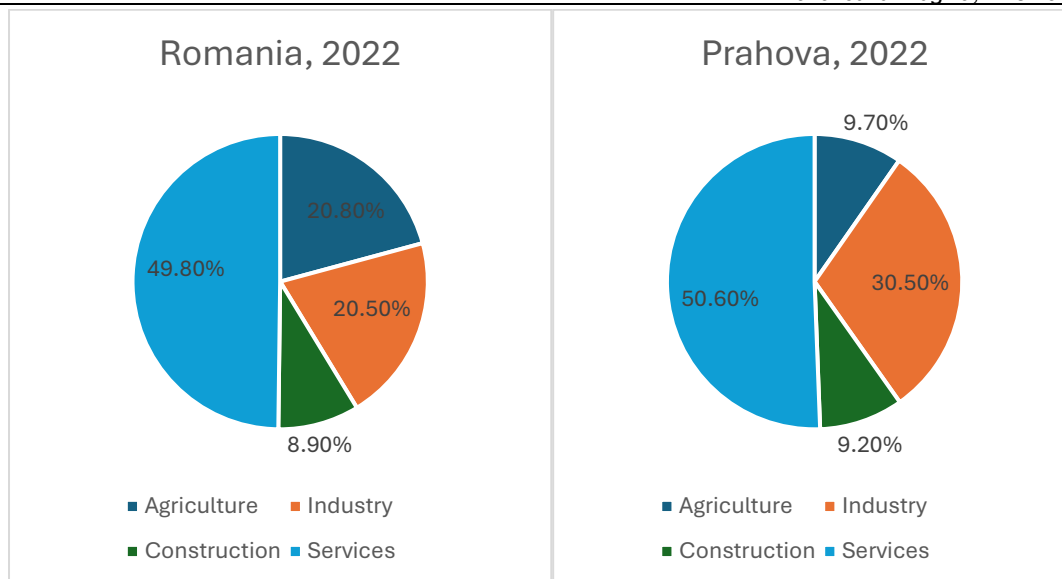


Fig. 3. Structure of employment by sector in Prahova vs Romania

Source: Authors' estimations based on Eurostat data (nama_10r_3empers)

To measure how specialized Prahova County is in the industry sector compared to the national average, we calculated the LQ.

General form:

$$LQ = \frac{(E_{i,c}/E_r)}{(E_{i,n}/E_n)} \quad (1)$$

Where:

$E_{i,c}$ - employment in the sector in Prahova County

E_r - total employment in the county

$E_{i,n}$ - employment in the sector at national level

E_n - total employment at national level

Table 1

The results after calculating the indicator

Sector	Share in Prahova County	Share at national level	LQ
Agriculture	0.0967	0.2084	0.46
Industry	0.3045	0.2049	1.49
Construction	0.0923	0.0889	1.04
Services	0.5065	0.4978	1.02

Source: Authors' own research.

According to the results, the region is highly specialized in industry with an LQ above 1, while agriculture is underrepresented ($LQ < 1$), and construction and services are close to the national average.

In addition, we also calculated the HHI and diversification index ($1 - HHI$) to determine the degree of economic concentration of the region, and more precisely what is the level of diversification of its economic structure. The value of this statistical indicator varies between 0 and 1; closer to 1 demonstrating a more concentrated economy.

General form:

$$HHI = \sum_{k=1}^n S_i^2 \quad (2)$$

Where:

S_i = share of employees in the i sector

Table 2

The results after calculating the indicator

	HHI	1-HHI
Romania	0.340	0.660
Prahova	0.400	0.600

Source: Author's own research.

In both cases the HHI indicator shows a moderate economic concentration. However, we can say that Prahova has a slightly lower economic diversification than the national average, its economic structure being more concentrated especially on industry and services.

In the context of the transition to the green economy, the calculation of these indicators provided an image of the local employment structure. A high economic dependence on the industrial sector represents a difficult challenge for Prahova County in view of the transition.

Table 3

Civilian employment-population by activity

Activities of the national economy	PRAHOVA (thousands of people)			ROMANIA
	2008	2022	2008-2022	
2008-2022				
AGRICULTURE FORESTRY AND FISHERIES	64.00	27.78	-56.59%	-64.84%
INDUSTRY	91.3	87.46	-4.20%	-7.20%
CONSTRUCTION	28.4	26.51	-6.67%	7.45%
SERVICES	118.6	145.45	22.64%	13.79%
TOTAL	302.3	287.2	-5%	-13.10%

Source: Author estimates based on national statistics data.

Employment in the industry fell by 4.20% between 2008 and 2022. Despite the drop in employment, Prahova is still among the most industrialized counties in Romania, as 31% of local jobs are in the industrial sector (compared to 21% nationally). A model of location decisions of business in the last decade has led large companies to locate production units in Ploiești and in the metropolitan area, benefiting from lower land and labor costs, keeping in at the same time the headquarters in Bucharest (for example, the production plants of Unilever, Coca Cola, HBC, etc.)

Of the four refineries currently active in Romania, three are located in Ploiești, Prahova County: Petrobrazi Ploiești (owned by OMV Petrom), Petrotel Ploiești (owned by Lukoil), and Vega.

According to the National Environmental Protection Agency (ANPM), the CO₂ emissions related to these three fuel producers amounted in 2020 to 2.6 million tons, of which 1.04 million tons are related to the Petrobrazi refinery.

Therefore, Prahova County will have to contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions at the national level. It is true that each county should have a contribution commensurate with the marginal costs of reducing emissions. For Prahova County, the main sources of GHG emissions are presented in the following table:

Table 4

The main sources of GHG emissions in Prahova

Commercial Society	Field of activity	GHG emissions 2020
OMV Petrom – NGC Brazi	Crude oil refining and Production of fuels	7.246.594
OMV Petrom – Rafinăria Petrobrazi	Electricity production	7.160.310
Veolia Prahova	Thermal and electrical energy production	2.340.795
Lukoil Rafinăria Teleajen	Crude oil refining and fuel production	2.929.086
Lukoil Energy & Gas	Electricity production	2.485.875
Rompotrol Rafinare - Vega	Crude oil refining - bitumen	320.957
Michelin Florești	Production of car tires	92.912
Total		22.576.529

Source: Author estimates based on the Romanian National Institute of Statistics

As the table above shows, the main sources of GHG emissions are the crude oil refining industry and the production of electricity and heat through the conversion of natural gas. In terms of natural gas-based electricity production, the largest installed capacity is located in Brazi and accounts for approximately 37.6% of the available gas-based production capacity, according to Transelectrica. The Brazi power plant contributes to the security of energy supply in the national grid (it can cover about 10% of electricity consumption in Romania) because it does not depend on the weather and can balance the market according to fluctuations in energy production from renewable sources. The owner of the plant, the company OMV Petrom, recognizes climate change as one of the most important global challenges today and recognizes the goals set by the Paris Climate Change Agreement.

5.DISCUSSION

A clear path to climate neutrality

Prahova is the epicenter of Romania's oil and gas sector, with the majority of refineries based there; oil and gas exploration and production also take place in the county. Conpet, the national oil transport company, is also based in the county.

Yet, the fundamental rationale for determining the future of this sector in the Prahova county economy is connected to the choice of the principal owners of Romanian

commercial businesses. Because these structures are linked to worldwide economic and value chains, the choice to alter them is taken with the financial concerns of any FDI decision in mind.

Possible transformation choices will be outlined and compared to other prospects in the region or across the world, including the cost and quality of the personnel necessary, fiscal and legal predictability, country hazards, and the quality and availability of public services and utilities (education, health, judicial system, infrastructure, etc.). Because the sector's present production facilities (OMV Petrom - Petrobrazi and Lukoil Teleajen) are entirely focused on refining crude oil for fuel production, its ultimate transition will need a large amount of investment to be economically viable.

As a result, depending on the strategy and objectives adopted, the macroeconomic decisions made, and the parent corporations, the economic impact will vary, extending from total job loss in the industry to a partial decrease and probable increase in the quality of the labor utilized.

The possible indirect impacts extend both to Conpet SA, as the country's sole pipeline transporter of crude oil and petroleum products, and to other areas of activity, given the important role played by these significant enterprises in the sector in the country's economy. In the case of natural gas-based electricity and thermal energy production facilities, decisions are influenced by parent corporations as well as the national and European energy situation.

In the situation of Veolia Prahova, supplemental interest is provided by the fact that it serves as the thermal agent for the Municipality of 'Ploiești', and thus any transition in the thermal and electrical energy supply system must be planned ahead of time and based on a resource that ensures long-term energy security.

The sector that makes and provides equipment to the oil and gas industry will be influenced indirectly by the oil and gas industry's strategic decisions. This sector currently faces stress as a result of decreasing capital spending in the oil and gas industry as a result of weaker demand and lower oil prices.

Commercial firms in this industry must redefine themselves in terms of target markets and fields. In terms of operations, the on-road vehicle industry continues to face a number of issues that affect both demand and supply.

World vehicle demand has been dropping since 2018, and some industry analysts believe that global demand for passenger cars has already peaked and will continue to decline in the coming years. The move to electric or hydrogen cars creates an additional supply-side hurdle for the sector. In terms of the influence on the Romanian automotive sector, it is anticipated that a 10% decrease in worldwide demand for vehicles will result in a decline in employment in the sector.

The oil sector, including extraction and processing, is a major economic activity in the county and will most likely continue to be so as long as there is a market need for oil products. We identified the most prominent challenge faced by Prahova County on the way to the transition to a green economy.

In principle, the just transition will have an impact on jobs in the industry sector. Prahova does, however, have an increasingly diverse local economy, which is aided by its geographic location. Yet, the local business environment's growth potential is being hampered by the demographic decrease.

If reskilling programs are in place, the workforce now employed by the oil industry has a good chance of being absorbed into other economic pursuits.

People who are not in the workforce have the most difficulty integrating due to poor educational levels caused by early school dropout rates, marginalization, and poverty. Adopting measures to improve mobility and accessibility (by regular public transportation) to metropolitan regions where schools and jobs are situated will facilitate the inclusion of many vulnerable persons in the labor force. Long-term social-educational initiatives, as well as other complementing measures (e.g., housing, investments to combat spatial segregation, and access to essential public services/utilities, etc.), are required.

Hence, promoting coordinated strategies to enhance living conditions in excluded communities would result in their desegregation and integration.

Investments that improve the quality of life, particularly in Prahova's major metropolitan areas, may help attract and maintain a more competent workforce, as may business assistance programs aimed at knowledge-intensive services and technology-intensive businesses.

On the other hand, despite these challenges, Prahova is well positioned to capitalize on a number of opportunities created by the just transition process:

Prahova has strong economic diversification and competitiveness possibilities, particularly in the manufacturing, logistics, and HORECA sectors. This must be supported through SME support programs in order to promote technological competitiveness, market access, and the consolidation of indigenous business models.

Also, the energy shift can be a useful chance to involve the general population in a public debate and establish priorities for the long and painful restructuring process of the local oil industry, as well as to find solutions for its legacy: ambitious land restoration and urban regeneration methods. If they are assisted in integrating and adapting to new laws, the current network of professional schools and local universities is a solid starting position for skills training in the industry, including the energy sector. (Raphael and Darren, 2022) Last but not least, national and EU-level targets will put pressure on the local community to minimize air pollution, a well-documented threat.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a "just transition" for Prahova should consider:

An appreciation of Prahova's contribution to the national and European economies, based on meticulous investment in recognizing and celebrating the oil industry's past. These could involve a number of projects to re-industrialize and rehabilitate significant old symbolic places into quality-of-life infrastructure and celebration monuments.

Climate change education and awareness, as well as the rationale and benefits of Green Deal legislation, can assist local populations in accepting and committing to the energy transition. A thorough awareness of, and capitalizing on, the immediate benefits of energy transformation for the local community. One such direct advantage is the reduction of air pollution from oil refining, which has been recognized in civil society engagements.

Also, investing in technology to modernize and support company development to help Prahova create greener and higher-paying jobs. Prahova has a positive baseline, to begin with in the manufacturing industry, but less so in the service sector.

An even more competitive and appealing vocational school system, best prepared and suited to market needs and trends, working closely with local enterprises; help Prahova face the challenges brought by the transition process.

In our opinion, the academic literature that is currently available mostly focuses on a single interpretation; they do not consider the variations of just transition or the connections

between its many components. A successful transition has clear goals of sustainability and spatial justice, in other words, new industries are clean, jobs are green, and goods, services, and opportunities are spread equally.

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