



Original research article

The European Green Deal and its translation into action: Multilevel governance perspectives on just transition

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the extent to which the concept of *justice*, embedded at the core of the European Union's public communications regarding its climate goals, is regarded coherently across governance levels. What do stakeholders across governance levels understand by justice and how is this reflected in their overall perceptions regarding the just transition? We aim to make both a conceptual and an empirically informative contribution by qualitatively exploring how the normative framing at EU level is translated via national contexts at the central level in Member States and then further to local communities via regional and local policy-making mechanisms, in four EU Members States – Finland, France, Germany, and Romania. Our work reveals the deeper impact that the differing interpretations of justice have on the shape policies take and on the allocation of funds, tasks, and responsibilities across governance levels.

1. Introduction

In 2019, the European Commission (EC) presented its roadmap for a green transition, known as the European Green Deal (EGD), to fulfil the Paris Agreement's [1] climate commitments and achieve carbon neutrality in Europe by 2050. President Ursula von der Leyen, taking office the same year, declared that a successful transition must be “fair” and “leave no one behind” [2,3]. By anchoring the EGD in such normative rhetoric and by placing the benefit of “people” at the centre of the envisaged transformations, the EU transformed this narrative into a political promise, seemingly backed by a broad political consensus across Member States. Furthermore, the EGD is financially backed by the Just Transition Mechanism and the Just Transition Fund [4,5], which further enforce the concept of *justice*, and which drives the labelling of the process of the EGD's implementation as the *just* transition.

However, connecting the above-mentioned ambitious policy action plans to deeply normative concepts, at an abstract level, does not ensure the swift implementation of these plans. Scholars such as Moesker and Pesch [6] already point out that the growth-focused economic

dimension of the EGD risks exacerbating already existing inequalities and injustices. Given the profound impact on economies and societies that the EGD should have, as well as the complex governance architecture which should be at work for its implementation, the purpose of our paper is to explore the extent to which the concepts mentioned in these normative statements – especially *justice* in association to the *just* transition and to the *Just* Transition Fund – are regarded coherently across governance levels. What do stakeholders across governance levels understand by justice and how is this reflected in their overall perceptions regarding the just transition? We aim to make both a conceptual and an empirically informative contribution by qualitatively exploring how the normative framing at EU level is translated via national contexts at the central level in Member States and then further to local communities via regional and local policy-making mechanisms, in four EU Members States – Finland, France, Germany, and Romania.

As the concept of justice is placed at the core of our research, the next section builds our theoretical approach of justice, and place it in the context of the multi-level governance framework. We further place the just transition in relation to energy since we explain, in Section 3, that

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the choice of the four cases relates to the profound transformation of these countries' energy systems and the impact this has on specific communities. The results and findings from the interviews conducted at EU level and central and local levels in the four countries will be presented in Section 4. In Section 5, we proceed with a discussion of national specificities and common threads identified in our results. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Justice in the energy policy discourse

The conceptual boundaries of *justice* have been expanded as its applicability has moved towards energy justice [7,8] building on the earlier formalizations of social, climate or environmental justice [9–11]. In the context of energy, complementary to the technical changes required by the transition to low carbon sources of energy production, the framework of justice has been increasingly applied in relation to energy policies implied by the green transition (in short, energy transition) with respect to both supply and demand of energy services [12–16]. The socio-technical changes brought by energy transition affect individuals and communities differently according to class, ethnicity, age, gender, location, and socio-economic status [16–22] and may create new vulnerabilities and inequalities [23,24] at different levels [25] and even among non-human species and future generations as vulnerable groups [26]. Most often, the concept of justice is applied in the research on the climate-society relation in contexts affected by the phasing out of coal and nuclear power production [27–29].

These inequalities associated to the relation between energy and communities are conceptualised via the energy justice framework based on three main tenets: distributive, procedural, and recognitional justice [30]. Following the evaluative and normative contributions of energy justice by Jenkins et al. [19], the distributional tenet steers the attention to where the injustices occur and how to solve them, the recognitional tenet asks who is ignored and how they should be recognised (being the closest the conceptual reflection of “no one left behind”), and procedural tenet focuses on the fairness of the process and identifying new, fairer processes. Over time, cosmopolitan and restorative tenets of justice have been added, referring to justice as being universally applicable to all human beings, and to proactively preventing harm and restoring those harmed to their original position prior to a damaging activity [15,31,32]. These two additional tenets highlight how it is important to not only identify where injustices emerge, how they are recognised and addressed and by whom, but also to take spatial and temporal dynamics into consideration to pre-emptively address the inequalities energy transition would create, as well as to address the differences in the ways these inequalities would occur in different geographies [33,34]. Later in our analysis, we rely especially on the distributive, procedural, and recognitional tenets and use the cosmopolitan and restorative tenets of justice as a complementary analytical lens for the interpretation of our results.

Normatively, all actors involved in the implementation of energy transition should have a common goal and vision of how the energy sector should develop over the coming decades and which should include the aspect of energy justice [32]. Nevertheless, “tensions and trade-offs between European transitions and local and global justice concerns” are already visible [23]. Although justice is embedded at the core of EU-level communications on the energy transition, there are still gaps in the way it is concretely implemented across governance levels. For instance, local capacities to invest in green local energy production are limited, particularly in contexts such as small urban or rural localities, and social groups, such as tenants or women, are still often excluded from the energy transition benefits and decision-making process [12,17,29]. There is hence a need for more pronounced understanding of the ways energy justice is being understood at different levels of governance and how these notions are being translated between the levels [15,19].

Given the profound changes that energy transition brings and the

multiple types of stakeholders involved at local, regional, state, and EU levels, we use multi-level governance as a complementary conceptual framework for capturing the horizontal and vertical dynamics of political processes, in which multiple actors at various levels take part [35,36]. Complementary, Barzuli and Kaufmann [37] emphasize the role various stakeholders, beyond public institutions, play along the horizontal dynamics, driving our choice for stakeholders interviewed further on. The potential of the multi-level governance framework both as a theoretical and a methodological tool resides in capturing the dynamic interaction across the governance levels, which further sheds light in understanding the shape policies take [38].

Therefore, our research aims to provide new insight into how different interpretations of justice across governance levels impact the shape that policies pertaining to the energy transition take. Furthermore, from the perspective of energy justice, particularly interesting is the allocation of responsibility in multi-level governance: who takes the responsibility for leaving no one behind in the energy transition? In other words, we aim to identify the perceptions regarding who should be responsible for identifying and designing the policies that address the vulnerable groups that should be at the core of the energy transition, as described by Jordan et al. [36], in the field of climate change, different actors operating at different levels of governance have become adept at “passing the baton” of leadership and responsibility from one to the other. This questions the ability of the different levels of governance not only to adopt common definition, criteria and understanding of what just transition means in practice, but also to clearly delineate who takes responsibility for each stage of the policy process and for its overall outcome. Additionally, as our data will show, the (lack of) trust among decision-makers across the levels of governance can further hinder the design and outcome of the policy process. Heffron, in his analysis of energy justice from theory to practice [32], applies different principles to assess the practices related to energy justice underlining the gaps between the objectives set in the SDGs and in the Paris agreement and the way national and local governments translated them in their policies. However, the impact that a multi-level understanding of energy justice has on the implementation of the just transition needs additional research.

3. Materials and methods

In order to analyze the different interpretations of *justice* in the context of the just transition across the various governance levels involved, we adopted a qualitative methodology based on the analysis of documents resulted from semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from different levels of governance, from EU institutions down to the local. Moreover, the interviewees include a diverse array of stakeholders engaged with policymaking within the scope of energy transition, such as policy designers, fund managers, mayors, lobbyists, NGOs, energy companies, politicians, researchers and local actors (see Table 1). The sampling followed the strategy of purposive sampling [39], meaning we aimed for a minimum of five interviews per country at the local level and five at the national level. We managed to conduct a total of 74 interviews in four countries (Finland, France, Germany, and Romania) and the EU level. All interviews were conducted between September 2021 and May 2022, prior to the debates raised by the energy crisis of 2022–2023. The four countries have been chosen along several criteria. They vary in terms of political and administrative systems. Germany is a federal state, while France is more centralized, yet the regional level matters more than in Romania, where the level of centralization is higher. There is further variation in terms of geopolitical background, with two post-socialist contexts included (Romania and East Germany). Furthermore, the choice of cases is the result of a lengthier network-based endeavour, since the researchers involved have identified a strong emphasis on justice in the discourses associated with just transition in the communities targeted in the four countries and have developed this research as a way to identify the extent to which the interpretations of justice across

Table 1
Overview of the interview sample.

EU level			
EU level	11	- NGOs (3), - EU civil servants (4), - EU energy sector experts such as trade union and industry representatives (2), - and EU energy policy experts (2)	
	Total	National level	Local and regional level
Finland	17	- environmental NGOs (2), - research institutes (2), - national government institutions (3), - trade unions (1) - policymakers and advisers (2)	- two peat farmers from Northern Finland (2), - regional council representatives (2), - energy companies (1), - lobby groups (2),
France	10	- trade unions (1), - energy transition networks (2), - national public agencies (2)	- energy companies (1) - researchers (1) - local authorities (3)
Germany	31	- local authorities and community stakeholders (10) - regional authorities, decision makers (4) - and industry representatives (8),	- trade unions (1), - environmental NGOs (2), - consumer agencies and charity organisations (6)
Romania	9	- trade unions (1) - energy policy expert (1)	- local authority representatives from two coal mining regions (5), - regional decision makers (2),

the four contexts, plus the EU-level, overlap or differ.

Interview guidelines opened with a question that allowed interviewees to freely elaborate their normative approaches and perceptions of just (energy) transition, by asking what characterises a “just transition”. We then asked about their understanding of justice with respect to a just transition relative both to the specific governance level where they are active and to their overall perspective on the process, which people and places they see as being affected by the transition (who is the “no one” in “no one left behind”), and who they deem responsible for action. This approach enabled us to identify what aspect is in the foreground of their attention from a distributional perspective – already emphasized by attaching *justice* to the JTF as a financial mechanism – but also to dig deeper in the recognitional (who is affected) and procedural (how can a just transition be achieved, who is responsible) tenets. Moreover, in our four national case studies, we focused on the interviewees’ perceptions of the EU policy-making process and on the efforts to “translate” the normative approach of policies, given by the use of justice, into practice across all levels of governance. In doing so, we also aimed to capture references to the cosmopolitan and restorative tenets of justice, which will be dealt with in the discussion section. The empirical material is structured in Section 4 based on the sets of interviews at the EU and country level, further organized around the dimensions of the interviews as presented above, corresponding to the three main tenets of justice, while the synthetic discussion section makes use of the cosmopolitan and restorative tenets as analytical tools to acquire further insight from the empirical material.

Upon consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed or protocolled after the interview. The transcripts and protocols were analysed using qualitative content analysis [40], following an inductive approach, within a core team with members across the four countries, which ensured a coherent translation of specific contextual elements towards broader conceptual dimensions relative to the core concept of *justice*. The content was then summarized in themes, patterns of normative interpretation, and understandings of *justice* in association to “just transition” [41]. This allowed for elaboration of national specificities and common threads. The analysis was supported by several video calls and an in-person workshop with the authors to discuss the findings.

4. Just transition from EU to local levels

Justice and other elements of language associated to it have become increasingly visible in several key EU documents and communications setting up transversal policy objectives [42], including those pertaining to the EGD action plan. Implicitly, these goals have to be taken on by EU Members States and translated into legislation and specific policies both nationally and locally. However, the following section illustrates that a key challenge is the (lack of) overlapping of understandings of the normative dimension of this set of policies, revolving around the different interpretations of *justice*. Additionally, as it will become visible from the interviews, the complexity of the just transition process is amplified by its impact both in the social and identity realm of local communities and on specific branches of local and national economies.

The section is divided between two main subsections, the first dealing with EU-level stakeholders and experts and the second with national and local level representatives across the four countries – Finland, France, Germany, and Romania. The interviews follow the same logic, with two main dimensions – the first referring to interpretations of *justice*, in line with the overall purpose of the paper, and, complementary, the second aiming to identify the respondents’ understanding on who is responsible for the implementation of the transition process and which are the main vulnerable groups that should be targeted, which reflects the implications of the varying interpretations of justice across the governance levels on the interactions between them and on the specific policy objectives at the level of local communities.

4.1. Understandings of just transition within EU institutions

Throughout our interviews with EU NGOs, civil servants, energy sector experts, and EU energy policy experts, we pursued Jenkins et al.’s [19] three tenets of justice – distributive, procedural, and recognitional – in order to understand how the respondents’ diverse interpretations, shaped by their own background and interests, ultimately impact how just transition discourse and policy are framed. The main outcomes from this analysis are synthesised, using the respondents’ terminology, in Table 2 and will be elaborated in the following section.

Justice as a guiding rationale?

Most of the interviewees **recognised** fossil fuel dependent workers as those being the most affected by the transition to a low carbon economy. However, interviewees dealing with vulnerable people in their work focused more on capturing the broad range of vulnerabilities that could lead to injustice through the energy transition process (see Table 3, Who is affected?). Social NGOs for example highlighted inequalities associated with ethnic backgrounds, homelessness and deep deprivation and thereby drew a diversified, intersectional picture of “no one” (in reference to “leave no one behind”) regarding European energy transitioning and its global effects.

Despite identifying different vulnerable groups, all interviewees agreed on the necessity to compensate for the unequal **distributional** effects of the transition. EU civil servants, independent energy sector experts and energy policy experts referred to actions focusing on labour market policies – such as reskilling, training, and the creation of ‘green’ jobs – as the key answer (see Table 2, What are solutions?). For them, the Just Transition Fund (JTF) serves as the key policy aimed at enacting justice, which might have to do with the significant financial investment in it. For the funding period 2021–2027, EU regional cohesion funds amount to €392 billion, amplified by national co-financing. Funds from the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, the **Cohesion Fund (CF)**, and the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)** are distributed among predefined categories of regions [43]. The JTF is an additional fund that all member states benefit from (see Table 2 for allocations to our case study countries). Despite the difference in allocation mechanisms, the JTF follows similar logics and procedures as other EU regional development funds in its transmission via the tiers of governance.

However, European NGOs did not explicitly refer to the JTF. EU

Table 2

EU allocations for JTF programming in the funding period 2021–2027.

	FIN	FRA	GER	ROM
JTF allocations in EU funding period 2021–2027	€465.677,79	€1.029.952,60	€2.477.674,41	€2.139.715,53
JTF share (%) of the total EU allocations per member state	24 %	6 %	12 %	7 %

Source: Authors, based on European Commission [43].

Table 3

Synthesis of the EU-level interviews.

	Recognition Who is affected?	Distribution What are the solutions?	Procedure How to implement them?
EU NGOs (3)	Women (3); single households (2); vulnerable consumers (2); ethnic minorities (2); the homeless (1); people with inadequate housing (1); young people (1); migrants (1); coal miners (1); energy poor households (1); the disabled (1); those discriminated against (1); the elderly (1); young families (1)	Education (1); energy efficiency/ housing renovation (1); social housing (1); price and income support for vulnerable consumers (1); deployment of green technologies (1); energy sufficiency (1); SCF (1); Fit for 55 (1)	Involvement of local authorities (2); involvement of civil society (2); local debates (1); democratic representation (1); local action partnership with NGOs (1)
EU Civil servants (4)	Fossil-energy intensive regions (4); coal industries (4); vulnerable consumers (2); people and places with less access to alternative energies (2); hard to reach people (minorities, disabilities, those without internet access) (1)	Better and green jobs (4); direct income support to vulnerable consumers (2); JFTF (2); SCF (2); cohesion funds (1)	Designing transparency mechanisms for the JTF plan (2); dialogue between municipalities, trade unions and NGOs (1); respect for people's political power (vote) (1); commission and member state responsibilities (1); private sector should contribute (1); involvement of local and regional authorities (1); involvement of civil society (1); involvement of trade unions (1)
Energy sector experts (2)	Women (2); migrants (2); fossil fuel-dependent workers (2); people in vulnerable situations (1); people in Africa and Asia without access to energy (1); the unemployed (1); those discriminated against (1)	Training and skills (2); social protection (1); creation of better and green jobs (1); decent work conditions for green jobs (1); implementation of EU pillar of social rights (1); JTF (1)	Private sector should do more (investment, training) (2); strengthening the right to information, consultation and participation of workers (1); better public participation through working groups (1); social dialogue (1)
EU energy policy experts (2)	Coal regions and towns (2); fossil fuel workers (2); energy and carbon intensive industries (2); people affected by energy poverty (1)	Training and skills (2); JTF (2); re-employment (1); early retirement scheme (1); renovation policies (1); financial compensation (1)	Active public participation (1); EU should push for consultation between national government, local authorities and NGOs (1); member state responsibilities (1); involvement of local authorities (1)

Source: Compiled by authors, based on the answers provided by the respondents.

NGOs and some civil servants instead pointed towards the Social Climate Fund (SCF) as an instrument to mitigate the greater impact on vulnerable consumers provoked by the transition to a low carbon economy.

Most interviewees expected “public consultations” or “active participation mechanisms” to be put in place as **procedures** to implement a just transition. Representatives of the civil society and local authorities ought to use social dialogue formats to consult with those directly or indirectly affected (Table 3, How to implement them?).

Justice in action?

No uniform definition of a “just transition” emerged within or across the interviewees. However, participants from all groups did reflect on the conceptual dimension of just transition, considering it in a rather broad sense. While all respondent groups recognised that the current transition would create new vulnerabilities for people who are dependent on coal for income and/or energy generation (Table 3), NGO respondents were the only group to place more emphasis on the already existing vulnerabilities. They define the European Green Deal as “*market-driven solution [that] risks worsening the situation of vulnerable people*” (NGO representative).

In this respect, if the JTF is considered as a possible means to support fossil fuel-dependent regions, sectors and workers, the SCF was also highlighted as a solution to tackle other vulnerable groups, such as consumers. However, at the time of the interviews, the SCF was still being debated, and it was unclear how the fund would act as a compensatory mechanism for vulnerable households. An integrated approach of combining both funding programs seems advisable, especially given that the JTF was criticised for “*focusing on the workforce [only] and being too narrow to leave no one behind and reach every consumer of energy*” (NGO representative).

Through a framework of local debates, public consultations and social dialogue, EU policymakers expect that the JTF will provide a voice to territories and regions as well as trade unions, NGOs, local authorities and the private sector. However, the implementation of participatory mechanisms is not clearly framed, which may lead to hidden complexities and delays in decision-making processes. Even if the JTF's broad framework at the EU level defines clear responsibilities in designing the plan nationally and locally, when it comes to its funding conditions and eligibility criteria, interviewees emphasized that responsibilities between different levels of governance are not fully understood by all those in charge. This lack of clarity may in turn cause difficulties in the implementation process. A procedural gap can also be found between the vulnerable groups identified by our interviewees and the target groups addressed by the JTF. Although both existing and potential future vulnerable consumers were recognised as being affected by the transition, these were not groups expected to participate in the decision-making mechanisms. As an energy sector expert says: “...[policymakers] have a tendency to favour the solutions well developed and well thought; it tends to favour the interest of the people who are already well in the governance process... and not the people who are affected by the changes”. Thus, the analysis shows that there might be a gap between the recognition of “who” is affected (recognition) and “who” is going to decide (procedural) on the alleviation measures (distributional).

4.2. Case studies: translation of European Green Deal policies to the national level

As shown above, the JTF is considered as a fundamental enabler of justice at the EU level, especially for policy-makers and provides the context that triggers member states and regions to develop guidelines

and policies for the usage of funds that should ultimately enhance a socially just phaseout of fossil fuels such as coal and peat. But does *money equal justice* once we move across different governance levels? The following section, divided across the four countries in our sample, illustrate the perceptions on justice, responsibility, and vulnerability which guide the elaboration of the policies on the ground, through the lens of national, regional, and local governance actors.

4.2.1. Finland

The Finnish case study explores the phaseout of peat for energy use as part of the country's aim to become carbon neutral by 2035. Discussion of peat extraction for energy use accelerated in 2019 as the Government Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin stated Finland's intentions to halve the use of peat by 2030 [44,45]. Due to both increased taxation and the increased price of emission allowances, the use of peat quickly declined. Yet it was only in March 2021 that a panel set up by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment proposed a blueprint for phasing out the use of peat as an energy source. In September 2021, the government decided on the regional allocation of JTF support. Although peat is predominantly produced in only three counties, of which two were studied here, the funds were allocated to 14 of 18 Finnish counties. In many of them, peat production and its significance for area employment is marginal. Thus, devising projects in line with EU funding directives proves to be challenging [45].

Justice as a guiding rationale?

Peat farmers and entrepreneurs are **recognised** by all interviewees as the most directly affected people in need of support during the transition process. Given their private investment in specialised machinery, some peat entrepreneurs and lobby groups are vocal about their concerns regarding the effects of climate policy on their livelihoods. However, as emphasized by the trade union representative, their reimbursement and compensation claims do not extend to the precarious seasonal workers employed in the manual work of peat extraction, for example, who remain invisible in this energy transition debate. In recognition of past events and path dependencies, an environmental NGO representative further emphasises that some groups currently framed as “victims” of the transition have benefitted from peat extraction over decades, partly at the expense of indigenous Sámi populations and the integrity of their lands. They state: “*I understand [the JTF] to be a policy aim – but the reality of how we get there most likely will fail to tackle these critically important past events*” (environmental NGO).

Regarding the transition **procedure**, an interviewee states: “There is a mismatch between timelines and needs: the decrease in energy peat production is eight years ahead of schedule whilst the bureaucracy is terribly slow” (lobby group representative). This position is being supported by peat entrepreneurs who perceive the national government's actions as too slow and criticise it for a lack of clarity in its communication. They feel left behind and uncertain about how to secure their income and livelihood in the future. Meanwhile a trade union representative we spoke to emphasises that the accelerated reduction of peat use was not as unforeseen as some have portrayed it, and that it is instead a matter of failed or stalled communication on behalf of politicians, lobby groups and unions who had other interests at stake. The peat lobby groups were seemingly opposed to the transition, using social justice claims to call for a “pause” and for a “slow down” of the phasing out process, pitting social and ecological justice advocates against one another. The war in Ukraine and the energy crisis that followed in spring 2022 made the situation even more complicated, as many entrepreneurs had already started the transfer process when the government called for slowing down the phaseout due to national energy security concerns. Roundtables, working groups and other participatory formats have proven to be instructive in developing a common ideal and goals for the transition, yet remain exclusive to selected stakeholders.

All interviewees agree on the importance of financial support mechanisms for the transition to happen in a just way. Despite this consensus, regional fund operators criticise the JTF as both insufficient

and inefficient for addressing regional needs. Funding allocated by the JTF is limited in its usefulness for the peat industry. Some interviewees therefore regard its **distribution** as out of proportion, given the amount of money and the limitations of its use (retraining programs, research, etc.). Claims were made by lobby groups for direct reimbursements to cover the costs of specialised machinery; a need that is now being met by national budgets. Meanwhile, EU funds might only benefit those who are versatile enough to frame their needs with EU language and logic: “*I think those who are educated, who can see the vision, they can go for it and they really benefit*” (lobby group representative).

Transition actors, levels of governance and the question of responsibility

Politicians were highlighted by interviewees as being the ones who bear primary responsibility for leading the just transition but were also critiqued for past failures in communication and for their inability to act decisively. For instance, peat extraction subsidies made the phaseout decision seemingly inconsistent and hard to convey as convincing policy. Lobby group and trade union representatives also recognised their own past failures to communicate the right message – the peat industry was due to disappear, and this should have been admitted openly and in a timely manner. In this respect, clarity in the communication of a long-term perspective and openness between different levels (national, regional, and local) have been emphasized as crucial elements of the processes that should enable justice within the transition. However, somewhat surprising in the context of a high-trust society, the interviews have also highlighted the rising levels of distrust and perceived distance between the EU, the Finnish central level, and the Finnish local communities, which provides a difficult context to the implementation of the policies pertaining to the transition.

4.2.2. France

The French case explores whether and how a former mining region in the South of France is applying the concept of justice in the process of achieving its low carbon transition goal. Exploitation of the Gardanne-Meyreuil mine began in 1987 and continuously shaped the socio-economic and cultural specificities of the region. After its closure in 2003, the region faced its first economic restructuring phase. A second phase is marked by the closure of the local coal-fired power plant, owned by GazelEnergies, representing 95 local jobs directly and 125 indirectly. It was among the four power plants the Energy and Climate law (November 8, 2019) required to close by 2022. What is striking about this case is that national stakeholders insist on making the energy transition “just”, not only for workers in sectors hit by energy transition, but also for citizens and territories. Meanwhile, local stakeholders do not apply a normative concept of just transition and are not necessarily aware of EU Just Transition plans. They argue for locally informed pathways of action towards the transformation of the former coal mining site into a hub of green technologies.

Justice as a guiding rationale?

A difference in the understanding and application of justice by each level of governance is obvious between the local and the national level. At the national level, justice is understood as the fair **distribution** of burdens and benefits related to energy transition, while, according to an energy company representative, local action is more concerned with attracting investment and creating and keeping jobs. The driving force behind local action is “transitioning”, not “justice”.

The concept of “solidarity in the ecological transition” seems to be used by non-state actors as a synonym for just transition. It **recognizes** the variety of groups impacted, such as workers in sectors directly affected by the transition as well as a “*geography of dissatisfaction*” (energy transition network representative), referring to people taking part in social protests related to the impacts of climate instruments on the households' purchasing power, as illustrated by the yellow vest movement. Interviewees broadly agree that the JTF should benefit companies, workers, families and households who may be affected by climate policy. The use of this fund must create jobs in the regions concerned.

Regarding the just transition concept, there is no uniform

understanding of justice but instead as many interpretations as interviewees. A representative of the local authority summarized the concept based on the three justice tenets, explaining that it means being “*aware, responsible and reasonable enough on the energy transition process . . . to implement it in a way that allows people to continue to live properly while engaging them in the process*”. Regarding the **procedural** dimension of justice, one interviewee at the national level criticised the way France is now approaching the transition, stating that nothing has been learned from past protests (e.g. Bonnets Rouges, Gilets Jaunes) in terms of policy-making decisions, which were all plagued by a lack of democratic decision-making.

Transition actors, levels of governance and the question of responsibility

A complex governance system was put in place locally to produce a territorial pact for ecological and industrial transition by the end of 2020, under the shared responsibility of the state and the region. This pact was approved by the state, which created a €40 million fund for the four French territories, including the Southeastern part of France in Gardanne-Meyreuil, impacted by the closure of a coal-fired power plant. Locally, four working groups with different commissions and a steering committee have been set up to decide which projects could be supported. A roundtable was also initiated by the workers from the coal-fired plant. But decision-making responsibility has been diluted by the many layers of stakeholders involved and by the many conflicts of interest linked to “*diverging visions related to land, cultural, economic and social issues*” (researcher). This resulted in a slow decision-making process that does not involve local citizens.

At the national level, a commission on ecological transition focusing on just transition has been put in place in order to ensure that all citizens are involved in the process (national public agency representative). Interviewees at the national level require the implementation of dialogue systems between the different governance levels to avoid competing interests and a siloed, top-down policy approach. They also require the creation of adequate public dialogue arenas in order to know the public's needs and to involve it in policy design. For them, this is the only way to promote ownership and acceptance of energy and climate action. Territories could be the best place possible for such a democratic approach to energy transition (Energy transition network representative).

4.2.3. Germany

The German case study focuses on the coal mining region Mitteldeutsches Revier, which is located in central Eastern Germany. During the process of German reunification in the 1990s, the region went through major structural change, and it once again faces a structural transition, this time induced by climate policy aims to end coal production in the region by 2035. Regulated by the Coal Phaseout Act (August 14, 2020), coal-fired power generation is to be phased out gradually, ending no later than the end of 2038. In the coalition agreement, the federal government has planned to expedite Germany's coal phaseout, ideally to occur in 2030. In our case study region, the challenges of this structural transition coincide with other issues such as an ageing and shrinking population, a lack of capacity for innovation, and a poorly diversified economy.

Justice as a guiding rationale?

As it relates to energy transitions and the accompanying structural changes, the interviewees understood justice to mainly be a social concern. They **recognised** families and households as being vulnerable through the resulting loss of coal mining jobs and the expected rise in energy costs induced by the transition away from fossil fuels. Protecting vulnerable groups as well as providing well paid jobs in the future were conceived unequivocally as central elements of a just transition in the former coal mining region.

Local stakeholders emphasize that **procedural** transparency and citizen participation in decision-making processes must be a core dimension of justice in this structural change. For instance, the mayor of a small town highlighted public opposition to another major change given past experiences with collapsing industries and the social effects

that resulted from German Reunification. The region will face the loss of a primary economic sector and the job opportunities it provides, whilst trust in institutions and democratic decision-making is decreasing. Referring to the question of financial aid and outcomes of the transition process, the mayor states: “*I am still positive about structural change, but this entails a fight about funding and jobs. At the same time, the transition is an opportunity to get new answers for the question of how to organise life, how to produce energy*”, so that “*families see a future*” (local mayor). The road map for how to achieve this goal seems to be contested, however.

In this light, energy justice is about the **distribution** of the burden of transition costs and financial support among different stakeholders and levels of governance. In designing just transition action plans, the interviewees bring various needs and demands to the forefront that ought to be acknowledged, paying respect to the capabilities of private households (e.g. income levels, qualification), industries (e.g. access to new technology), and local authorities (e.g. capacities to access funding programs) [46]. Vast European and national funds are available to support the municipalities themselves. The question of distribution among stakeholders in the energy evolution of industry towards “green” energy and jobs, yet limited capacity to access funding (depending on personnel, competence, and back-up funding) might exacerbate socio-spatial inequalities between towns and regions. Additionally, translating a vision of just transition into action not only stumbles with practical financing issues, but it also meets local resistance (for a comprehensive review see [46]).

As became apparent in our fieldwork, resistance to local wind power plants, a typical conflict, is mainly informed by the perception that wind energy profits unfairly benefit large scale developers and landowners, since few wind parks are owned and operated by the regional municipalities themselves. Indeed, ownership, involvement in decision making and the distribution of benefits such as affordable energy prices from local wind power projects can impact the acceptance of local energy transitions or lack thereof [47,48,49]. Additionally, although renewable energy theoretically offers a cost advantage compared to fossil and nuclear sources, its implementation is currently associated with heightened risks of income and energy poverty [50,51]. The question of distribution among stakeholders in the energy transition process is thus multifaceted and not only a matter of the availability and eligibility of funds but also of access to ownership and decision making as well as the distribution of tangible benefits such as affordable energy or additional tax revenues for local municipalities stemming from local wind projects.

Transition actors, levels of governance and the question of responsibility

The responsibility for drafting transition policies and guidelines (e.g. to allow local communities to benefit from wind parks through fair tax distribution) lies with the federal government whilst the regional and local levels are responsible for shaping transition actions within a given policy framework. Based on this consensus, the interviewees clearly consider the federal government responsible for providing clear targets and strategies as part of a comprehensive policy framework to realise a just transition: “*The regional government is responsible for the execution of visions delivered by the federal government; we are currently drafting the local just transition policy to contribute to the energy transition.*” (regional government). However, the regional and local levels criticise a lack of clear policy frameworks and resources as the basis for their work: “*We have a mediating role between federal government and local communities, but it is primarily a national and European topic. We do not have the resources to develop plans, etc., on our own.*” (regional government).

The discrepancy between the vision and motivation for the energy transition, coming from urban metropolises, and the burdens that rural areas face feeds into populist narratives. In the end, this has implications for election results, which in turn shapes politics: “*The first thing that was promised by federal and state policy was well paid industrial jobs, and that has not come true here*” (local mayor). Currently, each region organises the institutional setting for fund allocations, but it is important to include local voices in the process to avoid the perception that all decisions come from the federal government. This observation stands in

conflict with the firm demand that the federal government provides clear guidelines.

4.2.4. Romania

In its National Environmental Program, Romania sets itself a target date of 2032 for ending coal mining production. The JTF is applicable to six Romanian regions that must decarbonize a variety of industries. The Romanian case study explores how Hunedoara and Gorj – the two main Romanian coal mining regions to have retained a heavy dependence on coal production – are understanding, developing and preparing to implement just transition mechanisms by 2032. In both cases, major social effects due to the energy transition are expected, including unemployment, precarity and the loss of identity.

Justice as a guiding rationale?

With varied understandings of energy transition justice, the importance of decarbonization, and the role of local and national authorities in this process, stakeholders at the local, regional and national levels have different expectations for the EGD's implementation and the use of funds. To engage the various perspectives in the design of a just energy transition for Hunedoara and Gorj, regional plans were drafted based on extensive consultations with all relevant stakeholders (local authorities, unions, universities, business associations, NGOs, regional authorities, technical school representatives, etc.). Still, a general mistrust between stakeholders remains. All interviewees indicate that the government was not very successful in bringing the local communities together. Critiques directed at coal phaseout **procedures** also highlight the national government's inability to draft a regional energy strategy that clearly maps energy alternatives for the region. The process of investing in renewables had not even started, nor were mine workers being professionally retrained for new jobs. As described by a county representative, "*Romania, and this region in particular, doesn't seem ready for the Green Deal*". Local and regional stakeholders perceive the transition as being rushed. A union representative points to the mismatch in timelines, strategy development, policy goals and local conditions: "*What kind of energy do we put in place after we close the mines? The wind energy in this region may not be enough. So, the Green Deal is producing negative effects because many energy intensive industries from Hunedoara will suffer, not to mention the households*".

All interviewees **recognised** similar groups of people and communities as being vulnerable to and affected by the coal phaseout process. They expect the immediate impact to be on the miners that will lose their jobs and consequently their families' livelihood. Secondary impact will be felt by the businesses connected to the mine and the power plants – from those working in maintenance to those who offer catering and other services. Not losing sight of the groups affected, the union representative noted that "*[t]he reconversion should start now, while people are still working in mines or in subsidiary industries. We need to convince them that the transition is real and they have other options*".

The reconversion is a matter of financing, but the **distribution** of transitioning costs remains contested. In the logic of European Cohesion Funds, small municipalities with poor economic performance (such as the municipalities in Hunedoara and Gori) need financial help from the government to access the funds, as well as building capacities to access available funding. The local and regional administration do not have the experience to implement such large projects with profound reforms. One aspect frequently mentioned as a potential threat to the implementation and success of just transition is the local and regional absence of experienced fund managers to "translate" EU policies into action. Local authorities still lack a culture of collaboration, and while they participated in the consultation process, they are "*resistant to change and not willing to truly understand the Green Deal and the JT mechanisms*" (energy policy expert). This leads in some cases to a limited understanding of just transition per se and what the mechanism can finance, as well as to a diminished capacity to design a coherent strategy for the regions involved in the process.

Transition actors, levels of governance and the question of responsibility

When it comes to local transition plans, all interviewees regard the Romanian government, through the Ministry of European Funds and other ministerial institutions, as being responsible for coordinating and overseeing elaboration of their design and implementation. The interviewee believes the Ministry of European Funds, in particular, should have played a more active role in the consultation process by listening to those involved and elaborating plans based on local needs, expertise and administrative capacity. Local and regional consultations only offered limited opportunities to address local needs. Hunedoara and Gorj county mayors especially are unsatisfied with the final plans and remain critical of the Ministry of European Funds for not including all their objectives and suggestions. At the same time, while local actors have been actively involved in the consultation process and the design of transition plans, they acknowledge that both administrative capacity to write the action plans and the budget to implement grand projects such as JTF programmes (co-financing) are limited. Despite the different perspectives, local authorities indicated that governmental support, both in terms of financial participation and technical expertise, may be needed for successful implementation of the JTF.

5. Discussion: just transition across countries a diverse EU landscape

Just transition has been coined and promoted by the EU as a political slogan carrying a big promise, illustrated by the highly normative invocation of justice within its name. Therefore, our first step was to appeal to established theoretical approaches of justice, in order to identify the empirical use of the fundamental tenets of the concept – distributive, procedural, recognitional, complemented by the cosmopolitan and restorative dimensions. Relative to these dimensions, we then reviewed the understandings of justice held by decision-makers and representatives of influential entities within the just transition process, along the main levels specific to the EU governance framework (EU-level, national, local). While it would be expected that the interpretations of a sophisticated concept like *justice* vary by individual and across governance levels, it is striking to notice the extent of the variance and the impact this has on the shape policies take at the level of local communities. For instance, across all four countries there is a shifting emphasis regarding the focus of the just transition – and of the JTF money – from people who carry the costs of the process to those enacting the necessary changes, mainly within local industries. There is also a shifting emphasis on the design of the process, on who should guide the transition and who should be at its core – citizens, local authorities, representatives of industries, national authorities? Importantly, who should be in charge of determining to whom the JTF money goes? Different stakeholders across different governance levels refer to differing dimensions of the concept and to differing policy solutions as if they are conflicting or simply wrong, which then further leads to discontent with respect to whom resources are allocated to and by whom and through what means, as highlighted across all four countries in the previous section.

At the EU level, the message departs towards national and local contexts as both an idealistic vision and a policy goal: the energy transition will be successful if the process is implemented in a *just* way and if *justice* is ultimately attained. It embeds a cosmopolitan perspective of justice, transcending national borders and various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds throughout the EU, yet it also raises two potential risks. Firstly, it seems to overlook the differences across local contexts in terms of experiences and expectations relative to the just transition. In doing so, it neglects the distributive and recognitional dimensions of justice, while over-emphasizing the procedural dimension, steering the process away from the specific categories of people and communities disproportionately impacted by decarbonization and the energy system transition. Secondly, there is also an opposing risk, which is the growth of a siloed perspective focusing only on specific economic sectors, diverting attention from the fact that such a profound

transition will affect everyone to some extent (for instance, in the way that investment decisions at certain local levels, which energy producers must undertake, might affect energy bills at the national level).

Our data provides further insight into where the emphasis of energy transition is placed, from a justice perspective. When interpreting the concept, national actors tend to pursue a procedural interpretation of justice. It is approached mainly from a participatory angle, with our respondents highlighting the need to involve “all citizens” in creating a shared vision of how the process should unfold. This is particularly visible through the consultation mechanisms put in place at the central levels in Romania and France. However, justice is regarded with a more nuanced perspective at the local level, with the distributive, recognitional and even restorative dimensions much more clearly represented in the interpretations of the interviewees, especially in Romania and Germany in the context of coal phaseout, since the exploitation and use of coal is deeply engrained in community identities. The local actors (in the political realm or representatives of industry) emphasized much more specific needs, tailored to the specificities of their communities, where an underlying perception of injustice brought by the transition takes shape. While restorative justice usually holds a retroactive dimension, we now see an element of anticipation, or rather a claim that the transition should be implemented in a way that will not induce new injustices. Justice is intrinsically related to job creation and an overall “fair” distribution of both the costs and the benefits brought by the transition. While the usefulness of the JTF as a funding system and in terms of its implementation process is sometimes questioned (as in Romania and in Finland), the need for an energy transition is broadly accepted. Hence the focus quickly shifts to a logic of “winners” and “losers”, which speaks to the danger of populist narratives capitalizing on the process, especially in countries where trust in institutions is already low. Furthermore, while at the local level there is often little doubt about who the potential winners and losers are, recognitional justice emerges through the lenses of “respect” to be shown both at a discursive level and in terms of financial support.

Approaching recognitional justice brings us back to the “no one left behind” slogan. The local level has a more sophisticated perspective, tailored by how specific industries shaped the identity of the community: the miners and peat entrepreneurs (including their families), the workers, and associated industries. There is a perceived ripple effect when associated industries, which produce jobs and income at the local level, are considered in connection with these specific categories. Along with the primary categories, some respondents mentioned a general category such as “the vulnerable” or “low-income households”, while others mention more specific categories like seasonal workers (in Finland) and local businesses (in Romania), which possess fewer options to cope with the negative effects of the just transition. At the central level, the interpretation is again much broader and shifts back to a more cosmopolitan approach which prevails by connecting the just transition to global dynamics that affect everyone – for instance, the additional layer created by outward migration, mentioned in Romania. There are nuances to this approach, with some categories, usually the same as those at the local level (the miners, the peat entrepreneurs, the workers) being acknowledged as a priority.

The shift from the more personal, even emotional approach of the respondents at the local level and the broader narrative of those at the central level illustrates the third key element revealed by the interviews: communication difficulty between the central and local levels and, consequently, the lack of clarity with respect to who holds primary responsibility for implementing the process and who should be held accountable for its shortcomings in terms of procedural justice. Local respondents considered the central level to hold primary responsibility for elaborating what is considered “a plan, a strategy, a policy framework”. This is a paradox, since the same local respondents argue that central (or EU) policymakers do not understand the challenges faced by the communities while also seeming to advocate for a guided, top-down approach. The central-level respondents seemed to wait for very specific

input from local or industry communities, and sometimes expressed frustration with the fact that they meet resistance, or at least high inertia, that slows the process through which they should report back to the EU level. Central-level respondents associated this approach with the participatory mechanisms they claim to enact, at least formally, and even with the need to uphold the democratic nature of the decision-making process. However, it is obvious from the interviews that the local level does not perceive the establishment of dialogue arenas to actually enhance dialogue. Consultations are often regarded as purely formal, or even patronizing, while, at the end, the need for clearer guidelines remains unmet. Moreover, these dynamics also occur in terms of mutual blaming and scapegoating.

Overall, we observe a paradoxical coupling across all levels of governance: good intentions are associated with the just transition process, but dangerous pitfalls are generated by the lack of coherence regarding the conceptual and practical interpretations of justice in a just transition. This is exacerbated in contexts where citizens have low trust in institutions, meaning, the dangers are more than hypothetical for the democratic foundations that the just transition process should be upholding. A narrow or incomplete scope for the process might end up creating more inequalities within and across communities and social groups. Populist discourses blaming the “far away EU elites” not only for failing to address but also for creating local problems are already a reality. Social dialogue and mechanisms to foster consultations, even when enacted in good faith, can be regarded as being void of content, purely formal and consequently discarded. Embedding *justice* in the title of a transition process with such profound social and economic implications, requiring so much political and administrative efficiency for it to be enacted on democratic bases, not only raises the stakes and the attention afforded it but also creates huge expectations which risk generating long-term damage if they are unmet.

6. Conclusions

Just transition has become a keyword for the European Green Deal and the transition practices and policies across the EU countries. In this paper, our objective was to examine the extent to which the interpretations of the concept of justice in connection to the just energy transition are regarded in the same way across governance levels. We investigated these varying interpretations across the three main tenets of justice – recognitional, distributive, and procedural justice, complemented by the more newly added cosmopolitan and restorative tenets – from the EU to local levels, and in different national contexts spanning four countries (Finland, France, Germany, and Romania).

The 70 semi-structured interviews allowed us to illustrate how some of the main theoretical dimensions of the “justice” concept take practical shape, as well as how some aspects are overlooked. The interviews revealed the deeper impact that the differing interpretations of justice have on the (at least perceived) suboptimal shape that policies take and on the allocation of tasks and responsibilities across governance levels. This further captures the difficulties in translating the philosophy of just transition, with a heavy financial load via the JTF and, thus, focused on the distributive, complemented by the cosmopolitan dimension at the EU level, into coherent and effective policymaking across the national, focused on procedural justice, and local levels, which focus more on the recognitional and restorative dimensions. Even the results from the EU-level interviews show that there is a lack of common understanding and common framing of just transition once we move from policymakers to the NGO area. The lack of a clear practical interpretation of just transition at the EU level further translates into shortcomings of policy design and implementation at the national and local level. This differing understanding from the EU to the national and local levels recalls a “telephone without wire”, where openness to interpretation can be both a strength and a weakness. While the EU believes in its strong tendency towards investment and a just transformation, local-level transition actors develop their perceptions in a context of frustration. One

expectation may be that the different understandings of justice across governance levels function somewhat complementary, as should decision-making across governance levels. Yet our empirical material shows this interpretative flexibility regarding justice does not function as a cumulative strength, but is rather hindered, both at the EU level and in each of the four countries, by a deficit of trust across governance levels. Complementary to existing literature, this raises particular risks in the context of a general crisis of trust in public and private stakeholders involved in energy policymaking and energy provision [52] and of populist discourses increasingly gaining ground by capitalizing on energy- and energy transition-related narratives [53,54]. Therefore, the role that the ingredient of (dis)trust plays into both the discursive and the policy-making dimensions of the energy transition should be further investigated.

Our study reveals some important aspects regarding the just energy transition and how it is conceptualised across European contexts. However, further research is needed to analyze the various notions of justice associated to just energy transition at different levels of governance. This need is further shaped by the necessity to accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels. The war in Ukraine further urges a new understanding of just transition towards a more holistic and intersectional perspective in order to address the increasing uncertainties related to energy security, sustainability and equity. The diversity we saw in the interpretation of just transition highlights the need for further learning regarding the ways to address justice tenets in connection to energy.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Leona Sandmann: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Eda Bülbül:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation. **Raúl Castaño-Rosa:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Florian Hanke:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Katrin Großmann:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Rachel Guyet:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **George Jigla:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Senja Laakso:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Essi Nuorivaara:** Writing – original draft, Data curation. **Andreea Vornicu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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