DUST | Democratising jUst Sustainability Transitions

Deliverable 3.3 Energizing Change: Countering Media-related Barriers to Just Sustainability Transitions

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Abbreviation List

Term	Description
BG	Bulgaria
D	Deliverable
DE	Germany
EC	European Commission
EGD	European Green Deal
EU	European Union
JTF	Just Transition Fund
JTM	Just Transition Mechanism
JST	Just sustainability transitions
JT	Just Transition
MLG	Multi-level governance
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
NL	Netherlands
PL	Poland
SE	Sweden
TJTP	Territorial Just Transition Plan
WP	Work package

Executive Summary

The European Union's (EU) ambitious pursuit of a sustainable energy future, driven by the European Green Deal (EGD) and the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM), is unfolding amidst significant geopolitical and economic shifts. The urgency of this transition has been heightened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has brought issues of energy security, economic resilience, and climate policy into sharp focus. As the EU seeks to decarbonize its economy and reduce reliance on fossil fuels, this report explores the critical challenge posed by disinformation narratives that undermine the just sustainability transition (JST) across five European countries: Bulgaria, Poland, Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands.

The report highlights that disinformation is not merely a peripheral concern but a central factor influencing public opinion and policy responses to JST. Both traditional and social media have emerged as pivotal arenas where competing narratives battle for dominance. Disinformation is strategically deployed by various actors—including political figures, media personalities, and interest groups with deep-seated economic interests—to create doubt, generate confusion, and resist the transformative changes necessitated by JST.

Across the case study regions, the disinformation narratives identified are varied yet share common themes. A recurring motif is the depiction of JST as a threat to economic stability and national sovereignty. In regions heavily dependent on carbon-intensive industries, such as coal mining or gas extraction, disinformation campaigns often portray the transition as an externally imposed agenda that ignores local socio-economic realities. These narrative leverages deep-rooted anxieties about job losses, community decline, and the erosion of cultural identities historically linked to these industries.

Additionally, these disinformation narratives frequently tap into a broader mistrust of governmental and supranational institutions. In countries like Bulgaria and Poland, where political discourse often reflects scepticism towards the European Union, disinformation narratives exploit and magnify these sentiments. The JST is framed not as a cooperative effort towards a sustainable future but as a coercive policy prioritizing distant environmental goals over immediate national interests. This perspective resonates strongly in regions where economic development has lagged, and the perceived benefits of EU membership are unevenly distributed.

In contrast, pro-JST narratives observed in this report emphasize the potential for economic diversification, environmental restoration, and social justice. These narratives underscore opportunities for job creation in emerging sectors, the improvement of public health through reduced pollution, and the imperative to address climate change for future generations. However, despite their positive outlook, these supportive narratives often struggle to gain visibility and traction compared to disinformation. The asymmetry in narrative dissemination is partly due to the emotional resonance of anti-transition rhetoric, which is deeply rooted in fear and uncertainty—potent drivers that can overshadow rational discourse.

The role of media in disseminating these narratives is crucial. Traditional media outlets, especially those with regional or national influence, significantly shape public discourse on JST through their editorial choices, framing of issues, and selection of expert voices. Concurrently, social media platforms have become critical spaces for the rapid spread of disinformation. The algorithms driving these platforms often prioritize sensational content, amplifying divisive and misleading narratives. The viral nature of social media ensures that even fringe disinformation

can reach a wide audience, further complicating efforts to foster a balanced and fact-based discussion on JST.

The impact of these disinformation narratives on public participation is profound. In regions where anti-transition narratives prevail, public resistance to JST is more pronounced. This resistance manifests in various forms, from political opposition to grassroots movements challenging the legitimacy of transition policies. Least-engaged communities (LECs), often already marginalized by socio-economic factors, are particularly vulnerable to disinformation. The lack of access to reliable information, combined with pre-existing economic and social challenges, renders these communities more susceptible to the fear-based narratives opposing JST. Consequently, these communities may become disengaged from policy dialogues, less likely to adopt sustainable practices, and more resistant to the necessary changes for a successful transition.

Moreover, the uneven distribution of transition benefits and costs exacerbates social divides, fuelling narratives that the JST disproportionately burdens vulnerable communities. In regions where livelihoods are closely tied to fossil fuel industries, the transition is often viewed as a zero-sum game, where the gains of a sustainable future come at the cost of current economic security. Disinformation plays a crucial role in reinforcing this perception by amplifying concerns about economic decline, job losses, and social inequality. This not only hinders public support for JST but also poses significant challenges to policymakers who must balance environmental imperatives with socio-economic realities.

In conclusion, this report underscores the vital importance of addressing disinformation as a central component of the JST. Countering these pervasive narratives requires a comprehensive strategy, including transparent and consistent communication from policymakers, active involvement of local communities in the transition process, and the promotion of inclusive narratives that align with broader social and environmental justice goals. By fostering an informed and engaged public, the European Union can strengthen the resilience of its transition efforts, ensuring that the shift towards a sustainable future is both equitable and inclusive, leaving no region or community behind.

1. Introduction

The transition of the European Union's regions that rely on energy-intensive industries is gaining traction against the backdrop of the Russian invasion in Ukraine and the polarising public discourse on energy and climate policies. According to Eurobarometer, in 2024 more than three-quarters of Europeans (78%) agree that environmental issues have a direct effect on their daily lives and their health (source). It has been widely acknowledged that a 'just and sustainable transition 'is necessary to address the looming societal hardship and prevent a social backlash. This narrative has become a key element of the policy discourse, contributing to narratives shaping public behaviour and attitudes toward the whole economic transformation process.

Narratives and rhetoric can converge to form powerful ideas that influence our worldview. The dominant narratives become deeply ingrained, shaping our understanding, everyday practices, and even power structures. They can either limit or expand our choices (Holden et al., 2021), form a particular opinion about an issue, and establish an attitude toward a topic or theme. For instance, there is a powerful narrative in Central and Eastern Europe that the normal functioning of the electricity system would require the construction of a large-scale, baseload capacity such as a coal or a nuclear power plant. This narrative can influence policy decisions and public behaviour, potentially leading to the widespread adoption of that technology. Other narratives would call for the full rejection of changes aimed at economic transformation of a carbon-intensive region even when evidence and experience from other cases show that the transition could be successful and lead to an increase in the overall well-being of society. Incumbent political and economic actors have leveraged the juxtaposition of conflicting narratives to elevate the level of distrust in society towards the JST process, hence reinforcing the status quo.

Narratives about JST are amplified by both social and traditional media. Media disinformation is spread by informal networks of influence, including politicians, influencers, journalists and oligarchs whose interests often overlap or intertwine with those with specific political, economic or social agendas.

This report aims to identify the prevailing narratives on just sustainability transitions in eight case study regions across Europe and analyse the role of social and traditional media in impacting the participation in transition measures. The analysis focuses on key national trends with region-specific implications, delving deeper into place-based narratives and conclusions where feasible. The analysis looks closer at disinformation narratives towards the transition in the Netherlands (NL; Groningen), Poland (PL; Upper Silesia (Katowicki region) and Belchatow area of transition), Sweden (SE; Norrbotten and Gotland), Bulgaria (BG; Stara Zagora), and Germany (DE; Lusatian Lignite District (Lusatia) and Rhenish Lignite District).

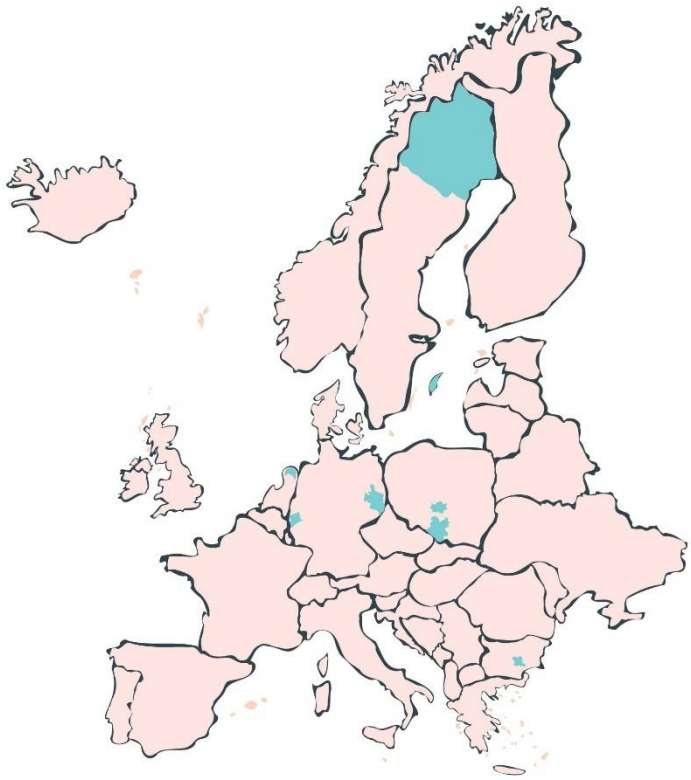


Figure 1 Map of DUST case study regions

This report draws upon a three-tenets approach, analysing media narratives in the field of sustainability transitions from the perspective of (1) the European Green Deal (EGD), (2) the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) and (3) just sustainability transitions (JST). The latter perspective includes attention to socio-economic and territorial disparities, relative costs and benefits of transitions - who pays for what - and how these decisions are made. The analysis also looks at the political, economic, and social consequences of transition policies, both on the individual, and on the community level, because these policies may not benefit all equally, and their cumulative power when deployed across different communities could amplify the potential negative impacts in terms of social inequality.

Based on insights into how relevant content pieces are circulated, the presented analysis identifies the role of media for the participation of communities in just sustainability transitions. The report looks comparatively at the media narratives in each country, its actors, resources, motivation and their effects on the public discourse. The results from this analysis will inform the quantitative and qualitative research evaluating the regional public discourse, attempting to explain the link between the prevalence of disinformation narratives and the level and depth of public participation, particularly with regard to least-engaged communities (LECs). Results of the analysis of how narratives influence the level and depth of public participation will feed into the DUST synthesis report D3.4 ‘Civic participation of least-engaged communities in just sustainability transition initiatives: Scope, depth and determining factors’.

2. Methodology

To explore the impact of disinformation on the public discourse surrounding the just transition process, an innovative information integrity analysis was employed through the use of two real-time, specialised media monitoring and intelligence instruments - SENSIKA and CrowdTangle - in combination with a variety of Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) collection techniques. These instruments facilitate the systematic gathering of data from open sources, organise the sources of data based on different characteristics, as well as verify and utilise this data. As the role of media in civic participation in just sustainability transitions is highly context-specific, its identification, quantification and qualification were done with the support of DUST case study partners' expertise and knowledge of local energy-intensive industries, as well as media and political landscapes. Specifically, researchers from the case study regions supported the analysis by mapping local narratives and stakeholders in the respective regional media space.

The **first step** of the assessment included the collection and identification of data on dominant public sentiments, ideologies, narratives, and common beliefs related to just sustainability transition and climate policies. The assessment was based on desk research of a minimum of 50 online articles and social media posts from a wide variety of media outlets including mainstream, tabloid, investigative, and alternative media in each case study region. The reviewed content was published after 1 January 2022. As part of the analytical framework, narratives were then classified based on a general typology of their claims, biases, channels of communication, and commonalities across case study regions.

In terms of social media, partners used CrowdTangle to track data and content on Meta, which remains the dominant social media platform in all project countries. CrowdTangle monitors three types of Meta accounts: pages, public groups, and verified profiles. While partners were free to submit sources from other social media platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter), TikTok or YouTube, these were only useful in so far as the relevant content hosted on them helped identifying the same or similar content on Meta, as well as the websites of media, political parties, NGOs, etc.

Box 1 Definition of the term narrative as part of the current analysis.

The term ***narrative*** is used in the sense of a non-fictional story or account of a series of related events or experiences. This definition is consistent with how the term is present in the discourse of institutional audiences, which tend to summarize narratives in a single succinct sentence that encapsulates its central claim.

Source: CSD

As a **second step**, CSD and case study partners collected data regarding key narratives, online information sources, including media outlets, political actors, and stakeholders for each case study region, ensuring a diverse selection of sources that cover topics related to the energy sector, sustainability, and environmental issues. This allowed CSD experts to map key knowledge, production, amplification, and consumption hotspots.

The **third step** of the analysis was to zoom in on key stakeholders such as institutions, regulators, energy companies and civil society actors that have a vested interest in or are actively engaged in just sustainability transition initiatives for each country. The information collected included the official names of the entities, any colloquial names that are often used in public discourse by media, politicians, etc., and the website and public Meta account of the entity. For private

actors, this also included the names of their CEOs, ultimate beneficial owners and the specific energy industry in which they are engaged. For government actors, the current heads of relevant institutions and regulatory bodies were added. Partners also featured political actors that are members of the national legislature and of the local, sub-national executive and/or legislative body in each case-study region (where applicable). This included naming the party's leader and providing a link to its website and official Meta page.

After the initial analysis of dominant narratives and the associated actors/accounts, as a **fourth step**, Boolean searches on the Sensika tool were generated using appropriate keywords. The collected data was processed and visualized through a content analysis, based on the following variables:

- **Socio-demographics and regional context:** Contextualisation of national and regional characteristics, particularly about the media environment and communication instruments.
- **Political factors:** Mapping political processes and stakeholders influencing the public discourse through conversations on relevant policies.
- **Social capital:** Mapping of community and societal matters such as the level of trust to certain policies, which will likely influence the social willingness to engage in participatory processes.
- **Green deal and transition attitudes:** As part of the DUST research objectives, the content analysis focuses on the beliefs and concerns that citizens share about the European Green Deal and Just Transition policies in their respective regions.

During the above-described content analysis stage, results from the DUST Task 3.3 Media analysis were examined in conjunction with results from focus groups, previously conducted as part of the DUST project. The results that are presented in this report will be further considered in a synthesis of more qualitative and quantitative research outcomes of also other DUST tasks. A final report, titled D3.4 'Civic participation of least-engaged communities in just sustainability transition initiatives: Scope, depth and determining factors', will present this synthesis. It will explore the relationship between the inclusive deliberative governance of just sustainability transitions policies and specific contextual factors and features of participatory mechanisms in depth.

2.1. Disinformation and misinformation

Disinformation and misinformation – the two salient terms used to describe media narrative patterns - are spread by a variety of stakeholders whose interests often overlap or intertwine with those with specific political, economic or social agenda, mapped in steps 2 and 3 of the media analysis done by CSD and case study partners.

In this report, narratives described as 'disinformation' refer to those that match the definition of the European code of practice on disinformation (European Commission, 2022) (Box 2). In most cases observed in this report, the disinformation narratives consist of misleading content that has a negative framing toward the EGD and JST. Due to the limited data availability to categorise content as not having 'harmful intent', this report does not make inferences regarding the narratives constituting misinformation. However, the intent, agenda and context in relation to the main actors were considered as part of the analysis.

Box 2 Definitions of the terms disinformation and misinformation.

Disinformation is false or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm.

Misinformation is false or misleading content shared without harmful intent though the effects can be still harmful.

Source: European Commission

3. National transition narratives

3.1. The Netherlands

In a national comparison, the public discourse on the success and efficiency of the JST has been most intense in the Dutch region of **Groningen**, owing to the heavy reliance of the local economy on the extraction of natural gas and the strong presence of energy-intensive industries. The region has faced significant socio-economic challenges that have had a profound impact on the local communities. Among the most important issues are the declining population as a result of ageing and young people leaving; an economic downturn linked to the gradual natural gas phaseout; and the persistent damage to property caused by the earthquakes resulting from the gas extraction process. The local economy is heavily reliant on the gas industry, and it is estimated that around 20,000 jobs will be impacted by the shutting down of the Groningen natural gas field.

The criticism of the government's handling of the causes of the earthquakes in 2013, along with the insufficient compensation for damages, has fostered strong local support for the energy transition. A large share of the local population now demands the end of gas extraction and use, organising protests and issuing formal complaints to local and national authorities.

3.1.1. Key actors, narratives and resources

The juxtaposition of conflicting narratives about the EGD and JST is central in Dutch national and regional media (see Table 1). Some of the most important general themes focus on the clash between nature preservation vs. resource extraction, with a focus on gas extraction sites in Groningen.

Table 1 Identified media narratives for the Netherlands (NL) and Groningen

Narrative	Framing	Agency	Emotion/attitude
Gas extraction in Groningen has severe impacts on local communities and citizens.	Negative	Social actors, such as Extinction Rebellion and political actors, such as GroenLinks	Disempowerment, lack of agency
The social feasibility and the overall implementation of The Green Deal is uncertain.	Negative	Political/social actors, such as the Farmers Defence Force (FDF)	Disempowerment
The transition processes can create tension between nature, agriculture, and economic development.	Neutral to Negative	Political and social actors such as Party for Freedom (PPV) and Farmer–Citizen Movement (BBB)	Distrust, disappointment, blame
The Green transition is a false sustainability transition, driven by political and economic factors.	Negative	Political actors such as Farmer–Citizen Movement (BBB)	Distrust, lack of agency, hopelessness

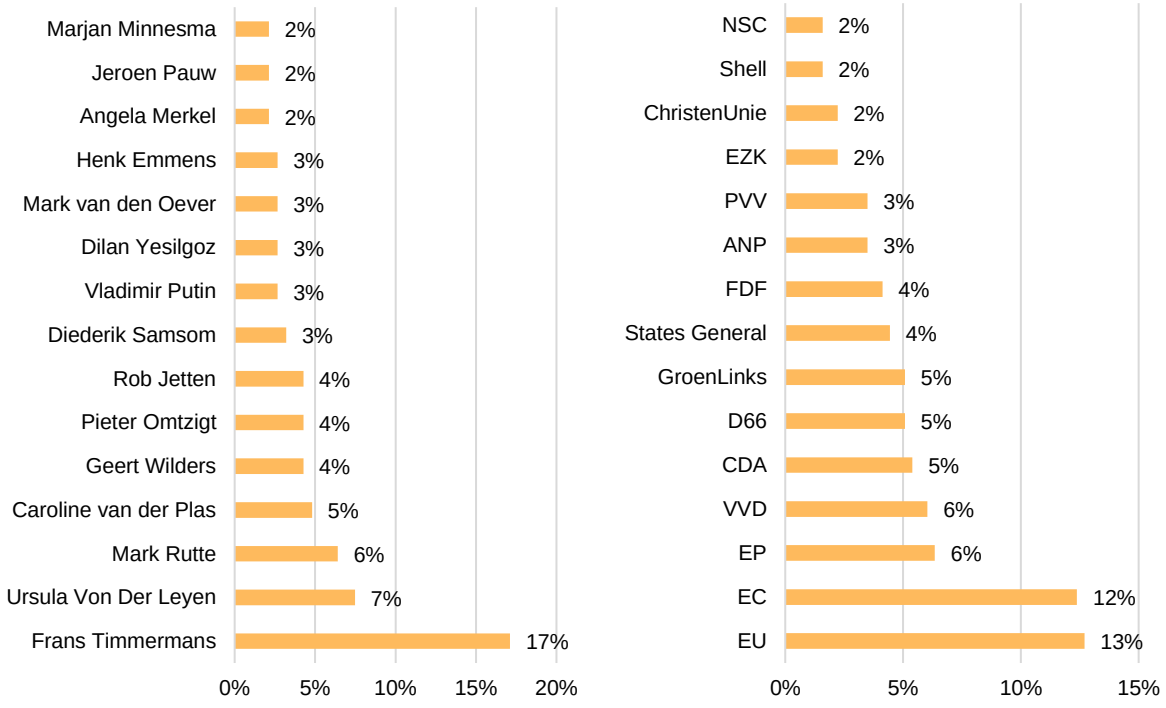
The most prominent actors, which are defending the fast implementation of the EGD and the JT in the Netherlands, and across Europe, are the non-profit organisation Extinction Rebellion and the political party GroenLinks. They are some of the most influential messengers when it comes to narratives promoting just sustainability transition, with their Meta public posts reaching up to

19 884 impressions in the Netherlands. Most notably, groups of actors have tried to influence the public discourse by disseminating narratives highlighting the negative impacts of gas extraction in Groningen on local communities and promoting renewable energy solutions alternative to gas. The EU, the European Commission, and the European Parliament are also very often mentioned organizations in online articles, with 31% of all articles referring to one or more of the three.

The voices of Extinction Rebellion and GroenLinks have been opposed by Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PPV), Caroline van der Plas' Farmer–Citizen Movement (BBB) and the Farmers Defence Force (FDF). The Farmers Defence Force (FDF) is the most prominent organization critical of climate-related, which has organized and taken part in a series of demonstrations against policies aimed at sustainable agriculture and husbandry since October 2019 when violent protests erupted in Groningen (Nos.nl, 2019). The beginning of the farmers' protests has been described as the "early sign of the now omnipresent polarisation between farmers' interests and environmental goals [...] in the Netherlands" (Clingendael, 2024).

During their latest demonstrations between February and April 2024, the FDF blocked roads and highways around the country, drove tractors to the provincial government buildings in Zwolle, Drenthe, Groningen, Gelderland, Utrecht and Noord-Brabant, and coordinated with Belgian farmers to block key road crossings between the two countries.[1] These activities received widespread international and national news coverage and sparked political and social tensions related to 'green" policies more generally. They maintain the argument that the EGD is failing to serve its goals and that it is a "false transition".

Figure 2 Most mentioned individuals (left) and legal entities (right) in Dutch online articles on the implementation of the EGD and the JTM in case-study region Groningen as a share of total articles (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024).



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika and CrowdTangle.

On both sides of the political spectrum, there is frequent positioning of opposing EGD-related narratives, particularly during the election season in 2022 and 2024. For instance, Frans

[1] The events happened at the same time as similar actions were taking place in Poland, Greece, and Bulgaria.

Timmermans was depicted as “having an image of a doer”, referring to his performance as European Commission Vice President for the EGD, and who has implemented “with military precision the most extensive green package in European history”. The narrative about his track record in EU policy-making was buttressed by posts and media articles, which contain data and information about the positive impacts of the EGD on job creation and the overall state of the economy.

On the contrary, Prime Minister Mark Rutte and his successive cabinets have been associated with terms like “procrastination” (in relation to the allowance affair, nitrate pollution, and gas damage in Groningen). Many articles and social media posts have promoted the narrative of the limited social feasibility of the transition and its negative impact on vulnerable groups. In turn, this narrative has been further strengthened by Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom (PPV), a notably “strong climate denier”, as a way to gain more votes amidst recent election campaigns – some of these articles have reached 150,000 impressions per article. These narratives amplify negative attitudes toward the EGD and just sustainability transitions, bolstering support for far-right movements opposing related policies.

3.1.2. Key implications

The monitoring of the Dutch traditional and social media space reveals the strong influence of narratives opposing the EGD and just sustainability transitions. While local organisations such as Extinction Rebellion are influential in spreading narratives in support of the transition, the group of right-leading social and political actors dominate the public discourse (i.e., Farmers Defence Force (FDF) and Party for Freedom (PPV)).

The issue of certain social groups (e.g., farmers) is placed at the centre of the debate. Farmers Defence Force (FDF) takes advantage of the rising social backlash against agricultural practices and gas extraction in Groningen that undermines the health of the environment. For instance, land-use issues related to the installation of renewables is juxtaposed to sustainable farming. Renewables are framed as destroyers of farming land. Narratives focus on the hypocritical nature of green policies, which are perceived as mere justifications for business ventures by vested green interests. This is the core of the narrative of the “false sustainability transition” spread by the Party for Freedom (PPV). The party maintains in articles and posts dominated by its key actors that there are detrimental consequences from the EGD and the JTM for local communities including the destruction of employment opportunities and economic development. These narratives further fuel distrust and disempowerment that have become strong elements of the public discourse on the transition. Groningen DUST focus groups participants also report that these attitudes are prominent in the region. Participants report that there are no tangible proofs that institutions can work for the public good, as well as seek to establish a balance of interests and equity when the access to the benefits from the transition measures is concerned.

3.2. Bulgaria

The rift between the regional debate on the coal transition and the centralised decision-making process has prevented the design and deployment of effective place-based economic transformation policies. Influential social and political actors have been spreading disinformation narratives, portraying the transition away from fossil fuels and highly emitting industries as the main reason for the increase in energy prices and, thus, of energy poverty levels.

The largest coal-dependent region in the country, **Stara Zagora**, faces severe socio-economic impacts, including job losses from the closing of coal power plants and lignite mines. This fuels

local resistance to the Green Deal, exacerbated by the intense media focus on the economic costs of transitioning from coal, without highlighting the benefits of the uptake of green technologies. Local media and politicians amplify these concerns, portraying the Green Deal as harmful to the Bulgarian economy and energy security. Many environmental civil society organisations advocate for a just transition and an accelerated decarbonisation of the economy but their efforts lack political support and often become the victim of a rampant disinformation campaign led by both traditional and online media outlets, many of which are also closely linked to pro-Russian influence networks.

The Bulgarian government has consistently promoted the narrative that the extension of the life of the lignite plants could play a crucial role in safeguarding the security of electricity supply not only of Bulgaria, but also of the entire South East Europe. The lack of political leadership to implement the commitments to the EU energy and climate policy framework threatens to undermine the whole transition process, locking in some of the most productive Bulgarian regions in a backward economic development model.

3.2.1. Key actors, narratives and resources

The main just transition narratives in Bulgaria's national and regional media focus on broad topics around the European Green Deal, which is often described as a utopian ideology that hurts the EU and its member states (see Table 2).

Table 2 Identified media narratives for Bulgaria (BG) and Stara Zagora

Narrative	Framing	Agency	Emotion/attitude
The just transition undermines the country's security of supply and will make people unable to pay their bills	Negative	Labour unions, such as the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CITU) and Trade Union Podkrepa and political parties such as Revival, the Bulgarian Socialist Party	Disempowerment, lack of agency
Self-serving lobbyists and NGOs are pushing for the transition away from coal	Negative	Political parties such as Revival and Glory, as well as influential journalists, MEPs and business organisation leaders	Distrust and the dissemination of conspiracy theories.
Just transition funds are a vehicle for corruption.	Neutral to Negative	Social actors, such as Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CITU) and Trade Union Podkrepa and political actors such as Revival	Distrust, disappointment, blame and dissemination of conspiracy theories
Transition policies are causing Europe's economic downfall.	Negative	Political parties such as Revival and Glory	Distrust, lack of agency, hopelessness

Political actors from the whole political spectrum and labour unions have been engaged in spreading disinformation narratives about the just transition and undermining the support for the coal phaseout. The most vocal opposition against the EGD is coming from pro-Russian, far-right and far-left political parties but even mainstream political actors are often publicly defending the preservation of the coal industry by focusing on the gradual nature of the transition and promising direct state support for the coal workers in the region.

Disinformation narratives most commonly focus on the role of the European Commission (16%), whose role in the transition is described with negative and sensationalist connotations. One of

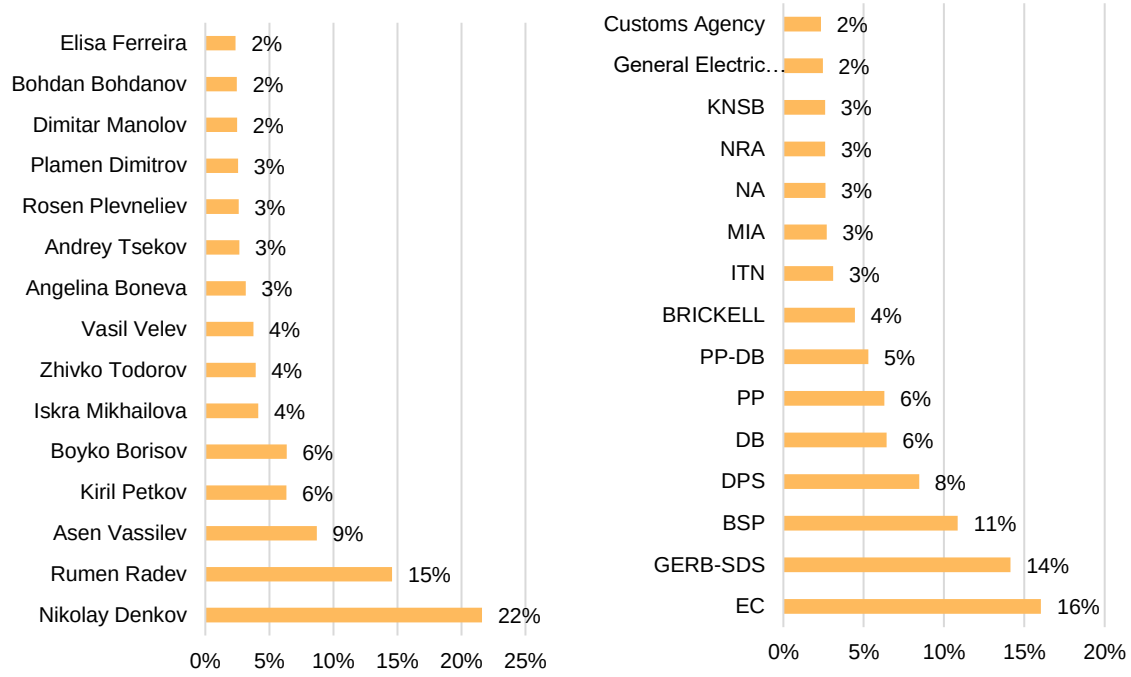
the most prevalent claims is that by pushing for an early coal phaseout, the European Commission is endangering Bulgaria's security of electricity supply. Political parties such as the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), Revival and Glory maintain that the EGD and the JTM are harming Bulgaria's economy and are contributing to widespread corruption.

These disinformation narratives exploit the general sceptical public sentiment toward the role of European institutions in Bulgaria, which is largely not based on facts. Bulgaria has benefitted sizably from the disbursement of EU cohesion funds since 2007 (EUR 11 billion, representing around 13% of GDP in 2022) (European Commission, 2023). For instance, Maya Manolova, a politician from BSP, has claimed that "the Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs) are used in a corrupt way, diminishing Bulgaria's future" (Manolova, 2023). Manolova reflects the argument maintained consistently by the BSP – that those commitments related to the EGD, including the TJTPs and the shutdown of the Bulgarian coal-fired powerplants, are a vehicle for corruption and that they should be disregarded by the government. This narrative is reflected in the generally low public support for the EGD (34%) and in the approval of the government (22%), and of the EU (42%) (Alpha Research, 2024). DUST focus groups participants also share that they do not trust policies related to the just transition on national and European level due to concerns of corruption.

Another common narrative is illustrated by Angel Dzhambazki, a member of the European Parliament (MEP) with more than 116 946 followers on Meta. Dzhambazki claimed during an event in Stara Zagora that "the Bulgarian energy sector is going to crash" and that in 2038, when Bulgaria has pledged to close all coal power plants, Bulgaria will become a "third-world country because of the EU" (Dzhambazki, 2023). While this narrative has gained country-wide influence and was picked up by the Bulgarian trade unions and the national media, it is not based on evidence or data research. Power system modelling studies, including those done by Center for the Study of Democracy, have consistently shown that the country's electricity system is capable of functioning without coal-based power generation, and this will not lead to security of supply risks (Vladimirov et al., 2023).

On the other hand, NGOs and centrist political parties such as We Continue the Change and Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) have pushed for energy sector reforms that consider the gradual phaseout of coal but have also succumbed to disinformation narratives about the role of the coal industry in Bulgaria. They have supported the approval of TJTPs, which, however, should not contain an early coal phaseout deadline, undermining the state-owned coal power plant and mining companies (Panev, 2023). The clash between the different narratives about the need for a coal phaseout happened in the background of mass protests by coal and mining workers in September 2023. As a result, the then Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov (PP-DB) signed an agreement with the trade unions that the government will guarantee the coal jobs until 2038.

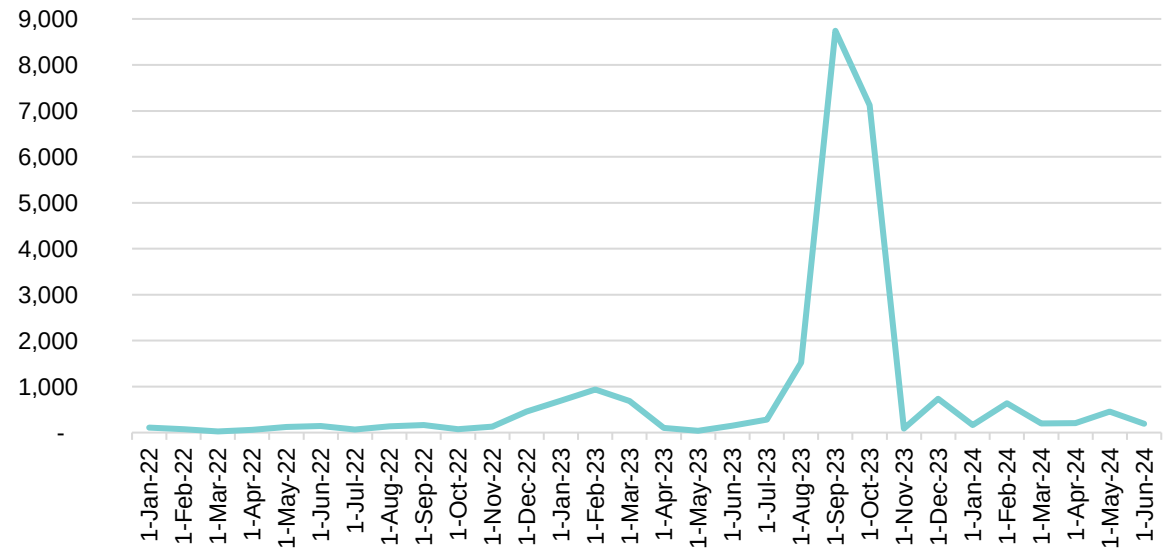
Figure 3 Most mentioned individuals (left) and legal entities (right) in Bulgarian online articles on the implementation of the EGD and the JTM in case-study region Stara Zagora as a share of total articles (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024)



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika and CrowdTangle.

In terms of the geographical coverage of the disinformation campaign on the JST, there was a 100% overlap of the relative search interest on content related to EGD on Google and the case study region of Stara Zagora (See Figure 12 in Annex). The most-read news websites extending these narratives are the PIK Information Agency and Blitz News, with an established anti-Euro-Atlantic leaning. In addition, the number of online articles on the analysed topics has surged from July to November 2023 (See Figure 6) during the mass protests of coal miners, coinciding with the redrafting of the Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs).

Figure 4 Number of online articles on the implementation of the EGD and the JTM in case-study region Stara Zagora (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024)



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika.

3.2.2. Key implications

The media content analysis in Bulgaria highlights a strongly negative and largely misleading campaign against the just transition process and the European Green Deal, particularly in the case-study region of Stara Zagora. Key social and political actors, including BSP, Revival, and Bulgaria's trade unions, dominate the public discourse, spreading disinformation about the adverse effects of the just transition and advocating for the preservation of the status quo. These disinformation campaigns by political actors exploit themes related to security, sovereignty risks, and anti-EU sentiments, preying on public fears and anxieties, which can lead to risk-prone behaviours.

The narratives, spread by right and left-wing populist parties contain derogatory labels for the just transition process such as “ecofascism”, “green dictatorship” and “EU-imposed climate dictatorship”. Such statements contribute to the radicalisation and polarisation of the Bulgarian media space, which contributes to high levels of hostility against the economic transformation of coal regions. The core message behind the disinformation narratives is is that the Bulgarian government should not be allowed to close the coal-fired power plants in Bulgaria, and that the EU financial resources available to mitigate the transition process are not going to be enough to compensate the socio-economic damages.

As reported by DUST focus groups, the growing radicalisation against the coal transition on the back of widespread populist narratives undermines the levels of citizen participation levels in the Stara Zagora region and has contributed to the stark opposition of local communities. Neither the political parties in Parliament, nor the main business and labour union stakeholders are advocating for solutions that would enable a sustainable transition in the region. Instead, the main objective is the preservation of the status-quo at all costs, which blocks the overall social and economic transformation.

3.3. Poland

Despite some progress in reducing the share of coal in Poland’s power mix, the energy transition process has been slow. Poland is home to more than half of the whole coal mining workforce in the EU, and the question of closing mining sites still strongly divides Polish society along political lines (Żuk et al., 2021). The **Upper Silesia and Belchatow areas** are some of the largest coal mining regions in the EU, with more than 70 thousand workers employed in the mines.

The main point of conflict in Poland regarding the transition has been the potential extension of the life of the coal and mining industry (Żuk and Żuk, 2022d). The Polish government and trade union representatives have reached an agreement on the phaseout of coal mining by 2049. Under the plan, miners will have the right to relocate from closed mines to those still in operation, or receive an early retirement package equal to 80% of their salaries. Yet, the practical implementation of these plans remains contested.

The public discourse on the energy transition in Poland reflects an awareness of the environmental costs related to delaying the process. Influential climate policy stakeholders are expressing willingness to endure higher energy costs in pursuit of lower emissions but the pace of change is frustratingly slow for many (Harper, 2024). The social unrest provoked by the farmer protests and the frequent clashes with the government over EGD policies prevent the achievement of consistency in the decision-making on the pace of the transition (see Figure 10 in Annex). In addition, the coal miners’ trade unions have captured the media discourse on the topic of coal phaseout, reinforcing the narrative that the energy transformation involves a ‘jobs

versus environment' trade-off. The Polish media regularly amplifies this dilemma by drawing an image of the transition as the main cause for rising levels of unemployment and for the potential future economic disaster (Krzywda et al., 2021).

3.3.1. Key actors, narratives and resources

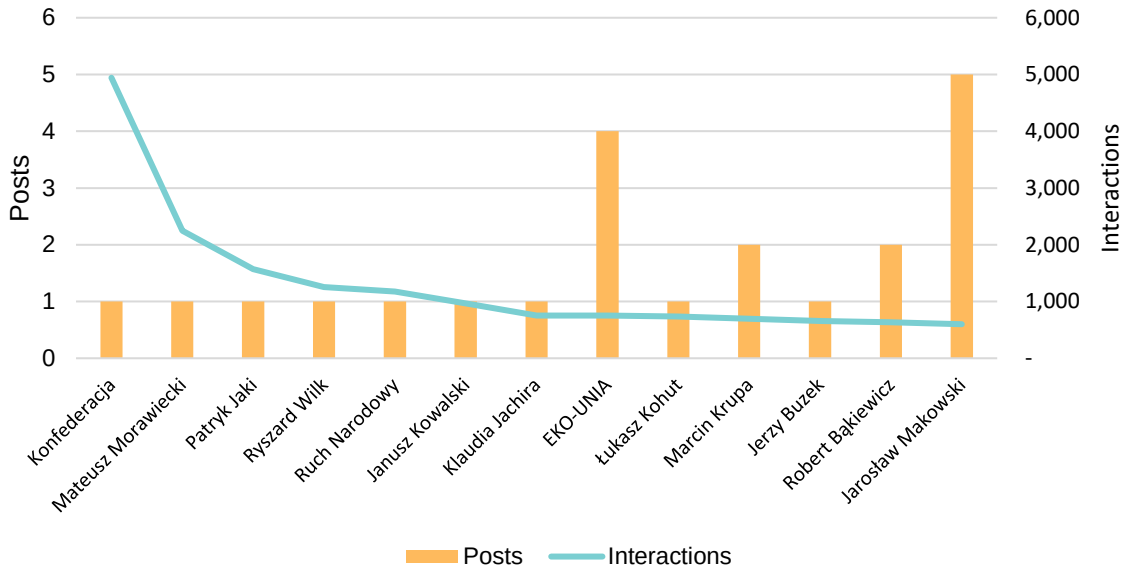
One of the key themes stemming from the media monitoring is that of "restrained progress" referring to the just transition process as the victim of opposing political forces. A popular disinformation narrative highlights the role of the EU and other European governments, including Germany, in imposing the coal phase-out on Poland.

The monarchist and far-right political party Confederation of the Polish Crown (Konfederacja) dominates the social media space (Figure 7), focusing on the lack of feasibility of the 90% CO2 emissions reduction target claiming that such policies equate to green fanatism and ideology. The Confederation party, represented by MP Krzysztof Bosak, has consistently argued that EU's climate policy is destroying the competitiveness of European economies and the well-being of European societies (Dorzecz, 2024). Similarly, the Sovereign Poland party pushes similar narratives claiming that "the European Green Deal will take the independence away of many areas in the country" (Sovereign Poland, 2024). To pursue its narrative, which is not based on evidence or data, Sovereign Poland exploits the ambiguities about the energy transition discussion that are entrenched in public opinion ambiguities. The party representatives are mixing up issues related to the decarbonisation of the economy with potential risks to the national security or sovereignty of Poland.

On the other hand, leading environmental NGOs such as EKO-UNIA, are providing counternarratives in the Polish media space that support the EGD, claiming that the arguments of trade unions and anti-transition political parties "coal pseudo-patriotism". These organisations are developing narratives about the vitality of coal regions and how they can survive even without the coal industry (EKO-UNIA, 2024). The former Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, has backed these narratives by consistently pledging to transform the mining and wider energy industry (Krzysztoszek, 2023).

The increase in media coverage regarding the EGD and JTM can be attributed to the 2024 election period and the 2023 anti-government protests (Figure 8). The pro-EU coalition, led by former European Council president Donald Tusk, won the election in late 2023, indicating a likely shift in Poland's climate policies towards accelerating the coal phaseout (Strzałkowski, 2024). On the contrary, Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice (PiS) party have positioned itself on the other end of the EGD spectrum, juxtaposing climate concerns with social fairness concerns. The PiS party opposes the coal phase-out and the EGD, putting "blame" on the European Union for the rising energy prices since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has capitalised on growing social discontent related to job losses and economic instability in Poland's coal regions, with EGD policies being portrayed as harmful to the future employment of local communities – an argument that forms the false narrative that coal and mining workers will be unnecessarily laid off. According to PiS members of parliament, the EGD and JTM will have detrimental impacts on the economic development of Poland's coal regions, causing a rise in unemployment.

Figure 5 Most interacted with public Meta accounts on the topics of the EGD and the JTM in case study regions in Poland (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024).)



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika and CrowdTangle.

Table 3 Identified media narratives for Poland (PO) and the regions Upper Silesia and Belchatow area

Narrative	Framing	Agency	Emotion/attitude
The just transition is a necessary process due to climate change.	Neutral to Positive	Political parties and NGOs, such as EKO-UNIA and Law and Justice Party	Acknowledgement of complexity, hope
Just Transition means ensuring the participation and respect of the needs of all stakeholders.	Neutral to Positive	Political parties and NGOs, such as EKO-UNIA and Law and Justice Party (PiS)	Distrust, disempowerment, disappointment
There are negative effects of the transition and the process has been slowed down.	Neutral to Negative	Political parties, such as Konfederacja and the Polish mining trade unions	Distrust, disappointment, blame
There is uncertainty for thousands of workers, and there is unnecessary reduction of coal mining and employment in coal regions.	Negative	Political parties, such as Konfederacja and the Polish mining trade unions	Uncertainty, frustration with injustice
The EU, governments, big corporations, rich and powerful people want to impose restrictions on society because of an ecological/climate ideology.	Negative	Political parties, such as Konfederacja and Patryk Jaki from Sovereign Poland	Uncertainty, frustration with injustice

Figure 6 Number of online articles on the implementation of the EGD and the JTM in case-study regions in Poland (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024).

Source: CSD based on data from Sensika.

3.3.2. Key implications

The social media monitoring exercise reveals that the disinformation narratives in around the coal phaseout in Poland present the transition as "imposed by the EU" and the related strategic policies as corrupt and unjust. Political parties and trade unions take advantage of these dichotomies, particularly in recent national and local election campaigns, stating that the just transition is an "EU-imposed doctrine". Their influence over the public discourse relies on arguments about the potential harm to local communities, which will be inflicted by the energy transition particularly when it comes to the loss of employment. This in turn reinforces distrust and disempowerment among the local communities that are most vulnerable to the closing of coal mines and power plants.

The results from the DUST focus groups show that citizens in coal regions vulnerable to the transition process are seeking responsibility from politicians, who act as "defenders" of Polish sovereignty. They claim that employment opportunities already created by the transition do not match their desired professional development paths – an argument often used as a justification for opposing the coal phaseout. The prevailing media narratives reinforce this worldview by pointing out how the coal phaseout is undermining the employment opportunities of thousands of workers in the coal regions and putting Polish sovereignty over its economic development at risk.

These narratives create false social and political conflicts that PiS and Konfederacija which are leveraged by ruling parties, amidst their alleged interest to retain control over the various spheres of the state's functioning. These conflicts perpetuate the lack of solidarity and ignorance in the public discourse, serving to protect the relative privileges of the status quo of socio-economic inequalities. The participants in the DUST focus groups reveal exactly that - citizens claiming that key decision-makers in the transition process have ignored the interests of vulnerable groups, which are the ones facing a profound economic transformation.

3.4. Germany

Germany is seen as one of the most ambitious countries on climate policy, aiming to increase the share of renewables and phase out the use of coal in power generation. One of the most vulnerable regions to the transition process is the **Lusatian region**, spanning Brandenburg and Saxony in Eastern Germany, which is a significant brown coal producer. The coal phase-out could affect 8,300 direct and 4,900 indirect coal industry jobs. Meanwhile, the **Rhenish District** in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's largest lignite mining region, produces up to 65 million tons of lignite annually. The gradual phase-out will affect about 8,000 direct and 15,000 indirect jobs, with 50,000 more vulnerable to the decarbonisation process in energy-intensive industries.

While Germany has made significant efforts to accelerate the just sustainability transition process in Germany, different political and social actors have increasingly contested the European Green Deal. The Russian invasion of Ukraine that has exacerbated the 2022 surge in energy prices, the conflict within the ruling German coalition about how the budget should be shaped, and the rise of the far right have all strengthened the opposition to Germany's green transition policies.

A recent survey on Germany, done by the European Investment Bank shows that 62% of respondents are not confident in the government's ability to carry out a just climate transition (European Investment Bank, 2022). Ideological differences between coalition partners in 2024 have made finding common ground on energy and climate policies very difficult. This was demonstrated by the dispute over the Buildings Energy Act – the German Green party's flagship legislative proposal – that was deemed too costly by the Free Democrats Party (FDP). The most vocal criticism of the just transition policies of the government comes from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which has spearheaded an aggressive media and political campaign against scientists and government officials working on the development of different energy and climate policies. The AfD influence relies on firmly rejecting the science behind the anthropogenic explanations, given to climate change, disregarding the overwhelming empirical evidence, and disseminating narratives that claim climate change policies are undemocratic, top-down mandates.

Germany's plan to phase out coal-fired power production by 2038 is a topic of more intense debate in eastern Germany compared to the western coal regions. This is partly due to the weaker industrial base in eastern regions like Lusatia, where the coal industry still significantly contributes to the local economy. The AfD and other stakeholders, such as the newly-formed left-wing populist party, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), which split from the more traditional Communist Die Linke, have criticized the country's plan to end coal use, ignoring Germany's political commitments to EU and international climate targets. They advocate for the continued use of domestically available lignite and the increase of fossil fuel imports from Russia to meet Germany's energy needs. In contrast, the eastern state governments, the federal government, and the EU aim to strengthen the region, located in the heart of central Europe, by transforming it into a hub for hydrogen trading and greenhouse gas-neutral industries.

3.4.1. Key actors, narratives and resources

The far-right party AfD serves as the main platform opposing climate action in the country. Although Germany has not experienced a protest movement similar to the French Yellow Vests, social backlash against green transition policies in other European countries has influenced the German debate. The AfD has actively supported public protests against consumption reduction measures during the energy crisis in 2022 and has opposed various energy- and climate-related

policies, including the country's coal phase-out, the transition to low-carbon mobility, and the phaseout of natural gas in domestic heating.

The Green party, which is part of the ruling coalition and leads the country's decarbonisation policy, has presented the just sustainability transition as a win-win outcome, where the rapid expansion of green investment will develop a low-carbon energy system that will also create new jobs, expand the economy, reduce the dependence on fossil fuel imports and improve the security of supply. The rising political backlash against the energy transition in Germany has inflicted lasting damage on the popularity of the Greens and, in general, of the "traffic light coalition", while boosting support for the AfD. The latter has pushed strong disinformation narratives about the EGD, reaching up to 30,000 viewings per post (AfD, 2023).

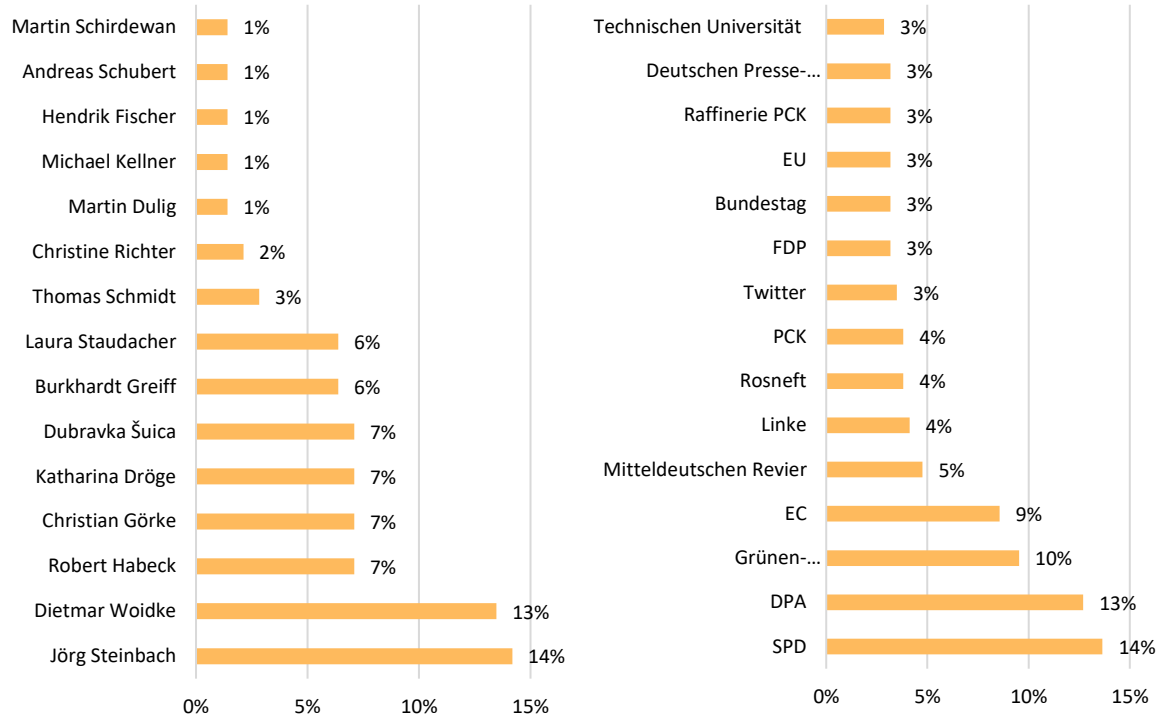
The party's rhetoric was directed at the heated debate around the Building Energy Act, a special law on saving energy and using renewable energies for heating and cooling in buildings. The party mobilised a powerful disinformation campaign against the law and its initiator Robert Habeck, Germany's vice chancellor and economy minister. Coining and mainstreaming defamatory terms like "Habeck's heating hammer" or "climate terrorists", the far right sought to delegitimise environmental actors and their policies. They have been using the populist rhetoric of "green elites" that betray the will of the people to deindustrialise the country and undermine national sovereignty. In this way, far-right actors are painting a dystopian future appealing to people's emotions and concerns.

While the Greens are dominating the media space regarding the JTM and the future of the coal regions, the SPD and its Chancellor Olaf Scholz have played an important role in mediating the tension between far-right voices on media and the supporters of the transition, while also pushing a more general agenda on social welfare instead of focusing on mitigating the impact of the coal phaseout on the most vulnerable groups in the affected regions. Such notions have been reflected in media content published in centre-right and conservative outlets such as Die Welt and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

Table 4 Identified media narratives for Germany (DE) and the regions Rhenish district and Lusatian district.

Narrative	Framing	Agency	Emotion/attitude
Federal Minister Robert Habeck is incompetent and promotes energy investments that are undermining the German economy	Negative	Political parties, such as Alternative for Germany (AfD)	Energy crisis, downfall, regress
The Green Party lies about the feasibility of the just sustainability transition.	Negative	Political parties, such as Alternative for Germany (AfD) and SPD	Lies, distrust, betrayal
The government is plunging Germany into an economic disaster.	Negative	Media outlets such as Die Welt	Distrust, disappointment, blame

Figure 7 Most mentioned individuals (left) and legal entities (right) in German online articles on the implementation of the EGD and the JTM in case-study regions as a share of total articles (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024.



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika and CrowdTangle.

3.4.2. Key implications

The public discourse on the just sustainability transition in Germany is nuanced. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) political party is establishing itself as one of the key messengers for narratives opposing the EGD and the JST. Notably, the political group takes advantage of the general discontent and the heightened sense of economic and social insecurity, deeming climate policy measures "eco-socialism". In the 2024 European parliament elections, the AfD came in second with 16 per cent of the vote, increasing its influence over voters in most of Germany's coal regions (e.g., Brandenburg and Saxony).

The AfD adopts an anti-technocratic approach in its communication, opposing evidence-based research about the economic feasibility of the coal phaseout. A notable trend in the narratives is that the energy transition will be a bad economic policy, particularly if considering the social inequalities caused by the phaseout of coal. These narratives contribute to the spread of disinformation that generates significant levels of distrust and disappointment with the overall process, two emotional sentiments that dominate the public discourse, The DUST focus groups report that the local vulnerable groups associate the transition with an "almost impossible to solve" challenge for the transformation of the regional economic structure, encompassing different high carbon-intensive and/or fossil fuel-dependent industries, which need to completely transform their production and energy use patterns in order to reflect the low-carbon commitments of the government.

3.5. Sweden

Sweden has been one of the leaders of the European green transition as the country is among the best performers in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, there are still enormous

socio-economic challenges, linked to the economic transformation of the carbon-intensive regions that have not been overcome. **Norrbotten** is currently the largest producer of iron ore in Europe, accounting for about 90% of the continent's total output. The steel industry in Norrbotten, which currently has few fossil-free alternatives, is in the process of transitioning to carbon neutrality. The steel plants are a major part of the region's economy, making up just over 10% of the total jobs in Norrbotten as of 2018, equivalent to 6,900 people, most of whom are employed by the large iron ore mines.

Gotland, another region in transition, is home to the country's cement industry, which plays a crucial role in the region's economy. The permitting processes for the quarries supplying limestone to the factory have been a significant issue at both the national and local levels. Swedish citizens actively engage in policy-making, and have participated in consultation meetings for each new quarry permit round. The public discourse on the quarries and cement factories varies. Environmental NGOs have taken an interest in the permitting processes over the years, attempting to halt the opening of new mining sites.

The public discourse around the energy transition in Sweden focuses on how the just transition is implemented. There is a general public consensus that this is a necessary step toward the country's energy and climate targets but no agreement on how the transition should be accomplished. In 2022, the Swedish Democrats took power and formed a right-wing government, whose popularity grew exponentially along with the presence of climate-related topics in Swedish media. However, the party has also faced public backlash because of its stance on tougher environmental regulations, European investments and taxes.

There has also been growing discontent about the proposed just transition policies as there are serious doubts about the inequalities that the process has been creating. Many actors have also questioned the overall feasibility of the transition. For instance, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, an influential actor in the media and public discourse, has argued that the just transition in Sweden has mainly focused on technological questions, and it is important that transition plans reflect the needs of both the industry and workers affected by climate policies.

3.5.1. Key actors, narratives and resources

In Sweden, the most influential narratives focus on the feasibility of the just sustainability transition, the conflict between environmental protection and economic development, and the need for additional investments in alternative growth models (see Table 5).

Table 5 Identified media narratives for Sweden (SE) and the regions Norrbotten and Gotland

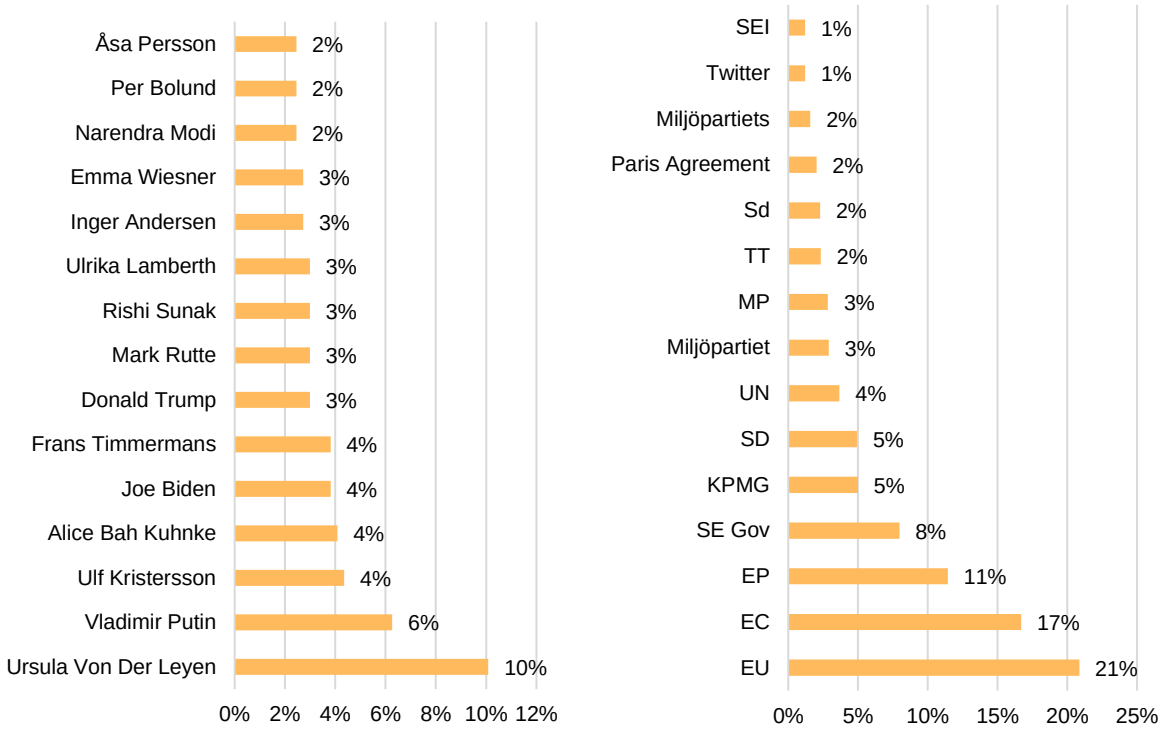
Narrative	Framing	Agency	Emotion/attitude
The North has unrealistic expectations for achieving the green transition.	Negative	Media outlets based in Norrland, such as Goteborgs Posten	Scepticism
Natural resources are being unnecessarily exhausted for business profit.	Negative	Political parties, such as Miljöpartiet de Gröna	Scepticism, concern
Investments in alternative economic development areas are necessary to meet the societal changes caused by the green transition.	Positive and Negative	Social stakeholders, such as the association Jernkontoret and Region Norbotten	Distrust, doubt

Domestic, European and international voices dominate the public discourse on just transition issues in Sweden. Ulf Kristersson, the Prime Minister of Sweden, is one of the most commonly cited individuals by the most influential media outlets. He came into the spotlight when his coalition government announced a decision to backtrack on GHG emission reduction policies. The result was a public backlash, particularly when in 2023 the Parliament put the Climate and Environment Minister Romina Pourmokhtari to a vote of no confidence because of the government's announced climate action plan seen as not ambitious enough to reduce emissions (Sverigesradio, 2023). This sparked distrust in the government's ability to achieve Sweden's energy and climate targets.

On the other hand, Jernkontoret – the steel producers organisation, has been an influential voice in favour of industrial decarbonisation in Sweden. In particular, it has supported key narratives on different potential decarbonisation pathways of the steelmaking industry, and on the plans of steel companies to construct a hydrogen plant to support the economic transformation of the Norrbotten region. The goal has been to enable investment that contributes to the fact that the people who today manufacture steel in Norrbotten will be able to continue to do so even after the transition" (Jernkontoret, 2023).

Similarly, Region Norbotten, a Norbotten-based company, focused on healthcare, regional development and culture, has put a spin on the economic development issue, by arguing that "100, 000 new residents will be attracted to Norbotten" thanks to the new green industrial investment projects (Stina Almkvist, 2022). By announcing their project North Sweden Green Deal, in cooperation with several municipalities in the region, the company addresses public concerns over the societal changes linked to the green transition, i.e., the regional demographic crisis. Nevertheless, stakeholders such as Miljöpartiet de Gröna, Sweden's Green Party, take a more conscious stance, disseminating narratives about the threat from natural resource exhaustion, arguing that "the transition must be done with care for communities and nature" (Miljöpartiet de Gröna, 2022).

Figure 8 Most mentioned individuals (left) and legal entities (right) in Swedish online articles on the implementation of the EGD and the JTM (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024).



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika and CrowdTangle.

3.5.2. Key implications

The overarching theme of the narratives that were mapped for Sweden through the use of monitoring tools focuses on how the transition process can be completed, leaving out questions as to 'why', 'when' and 'whether' the transition is necessary at all. This is in stark contrast with the predominant narratives about the lack of feasibility of the just transition disseminated by different actors in the other case study regions.

The narrative about the policy dilemma of juxtaposing economic development to the quality of nature preservation and the livelihoods of vulnerable groups is placed at the centre of the public discourse in Sweden. Business representatives play a significant role in the debate although some of the media narratives are trying to entrench a negative public sentiment against large industrial players portrayed as profit seekers whose interests go against the public good.

Jernkontoret and Region Norbotten take advantage of the rising concern over the region's economic outlook by highlighting possible investments in new technologies that can be potential solutions to local communities, thereby framing the green transition as an opportunity to develop and modernise the steel and related industries, rather than an obstacle. The main media discourse narratives focus on the potential positive effects of the green transition policies, accentuating the need for public-private partnerships and investments underway as part of the overall just transition agenda of the region.

However, these narratives contribute to attitudes of uncertainty and distrust, as noted by the Norbotten DUST focus groups. Participants from the minority Sami community place high value on the preservation of their livelihood, way of life, culture and traditions due to the fast industrialisation of the region and the related high social and economic costs. On the other hand,

youth and local business owners perceive the transition as a way to solve structural rural challenges, increase quality of life and create new employment opportunities, if the inevitable drawbacks from this process are successfully overcome.

4. Comparative assessment

Results presented in this report contribute to the research that focuses on the impact of widespread disinformation narratives on the public discourse around the success of the JST. The analysis underlying the report was conducted in some of the European regions that are most vulnerable to the phaseout of coal and carbon-intensive industries. The report provides insights into the factors that may impede or encourage greater public participation of the most vulnerable groups in the affected regions. The assessment identifies a variety of narratives and a plethora of social and political actors moulding the public discourse on the topic across the five studied countries.

Below we present a summary of the key trends stemming from a comparative analysis of research results per case study region, as well as a list of targeted high-level policy recommendations to reduce the influence of propaganda and disinformation on the media and public discourse about the JST. Aligned with the objectives of the DUST project, these recommendations also promote greater participation of vulnerable citizen groups in policy-making processes.

4.1. Key trends in narratives influencing the public discourse

A review of results of the media analyses in case study regions demonstrate that the narratives around the EGD and JST become part of a broader discourse between polarising issues on the conservative-liberal dichotomy, including issues such as gender, green values, climate scepticism and others. These narratives are influenced by differences in regional social context, political factors, the social capital and public attitudes toward the EGD and JST.

The why and how: Compared to Sweden and the Netherlands, prevalent narratives in Germany, Poland, and Bulgaria are more focused on why the transition is taking place as a whole. Narratives related to its economic and social feasibility are used to undermine trust in the whole process of economic transformation. A specifically important role is played by narratives about the risk of corruption linked to the projects and initiatives that are part of the transition. The TJTPs and the coal phaseout strategies are often depicted as corrupt policies aiming to transfer economic opportunities and wealth from the coal-dependent communities to outsider green investors.

In Bulgaria and Poland, such arguments are often conflated with other issues that are portrayed as part of an overarching European “liberal” agenda. Right-leaning political actors tend to question the overall necessity of the energy transition, which is a key political factor influencing the public discourse regarding the EGD and JST.

Meanwhile, the public discourse in Sweden and the Netherlands tends to focus on *how* the just transition is taking place instead of discussing whether it should happen in the first place. Around 62% of Dutch respondents to a European Investment Bank climate survey (2022), for instance, believe policies to tackle climate change will create more jobs than they eliminate, while an equal number of Bulgarians believe in the opposite outcome.

Economic development and social and environmental fairness: The conflict between economic development and environmental protection is a common theme in Poland, the

Netherlands, and Sweden. Political parties and labour unions exploit the rising social pressure surrounding environmental impact of matters, such as farming practices, gas exploitation, and renewable energy technologies. In the Netherlands, concerns of affected social groups tend to be portrayed by pro-EGD and JT stakeholders as inextricably linked to environmental preservation (i.e., farmers), while the opposition tends to use arguments related to the negative impacts of gas extraction. This is particularly due to the socio-demographic characteristics of the country, observed in more detail in Chapter 3. Polish right-wing politicians, on the other hand, have exploited aspects of the TJTPs that have remained uncertain, such as the employment and reskilling measures, and have emphasised the fears of coal and mining workers losing their jobs.

Diminishing trust as fuel for polarization: Distrust in JST processes is a recurring theme in all analysed countries. This reflects the general distrust of the European population about the direction of national and EU-level policies. Disinformation narratives that aim to reflect the general distrust in mainstream politicians tend to highlight the potential harm of the uncertainty about long-term policies to certain social groups, or the use of these policies as vehicles for corruption practices. Low levels of support for the government with respect to energy and climate policy are most pronounced in Poland and Bulgaria, indicating 60% and 73% of respondents in a European citizen support for climate action survey saying the government is not doing enough to tackle climate change as a whole (European Commission, 2023).

Far-right political actors spread narratives that label green policies as synonymous with “green dictatorship” or conflate the EGD with various other issues such as unemployment and economic decline that are perceived as belonging to an overarching “liberal” ideology. This has led to polarisation on the EGD topic, attracting much greater public scrutiny over any government policy about low-carbon policies, green investments or regional economic transformation. Notably, the number of followers of these parties, and by extension, of their dominant narratives have grown exponentially especially in regions with a developed gas, coal and mining industry, undergoing a green transition through the Just Transition Fund (JTF).

4.2. Key insights for public participation

The key trends in media narratives influencing public discourse that are observed in this report are an important element in an increased understanding of how these narratives affect the participation of citizens in JST. Factors influencing this participation are observed in the broader DUST project, particularly the tasks that contributed to D3.2 ‘Civic participation of least-engaged communities in the deliberative governance of just sustainability transitions: (Digital) facilitators and barriers’. Several obstacles to the involvement of citizens were identified as a result of the spread of disinformation narratives. These obstacles include (1) distrust; (2) perceived impact of JST policies; (3) their perceived level of life satisfaction as a result of JST policies; and (4) specific social and cultural norms. All obstacles ultimately affect the willingness of citizens, particularly LECs, to form pro-JST sentiments (see Table 6).

The willingness factors observed in this report are in line with the analytical framework for distinguishing participation of LEC, which is described in more detail in D1.1 ‘Theoretical and conceptual framework’. The media analysis has shown that disinformation narratives affect public sentiments toward the EGD and JST as a whole as well as sentiments toward some of the particular aspects of the policy approaches. Sentiments can in turn impact in particular the motivation or willingness to participate in policies or interventions relevant to JST. Within the DUST project, this link will be further explored in D3.4.

Table 6 Willingness factors identified as part of the DUST project

Willingness factors
Trust, e.g. in government and decision-making processes for sustainable transition
Content of public policies for sustainable transition and how they link to own needs and concerns
Impact of one's participation
Attitudes within one's social circle towards the transition and towards participation in public policies supporting the transition
Cultural/social traditions, values, norms (e.g. hierarchical or gender norms)

4.3. Mitigating the impact of disinformation on just sustainability transitions

Geopolitical tensions, political instability, and ongoing social and economic pressures that countries face during their just sustainability transitions amplify the influence of conflicting and often misleading narratives. By effectively addressing the tools used by dominant actors and reducing disinformation, public discourse can become a valuable tool for promoting democratic participation, leading to more representative and inclusive place-based policies.

Outlined below are some of the necessary steps to ensure higher information integrity that can impact the overall just transition process in the case study regions. These will be expanded on further in the future research work of the DUST project, namely in the synthesis report D3.4 'Civic participation of least-engaged communities in just sustainability transition initiatives: Scope, depth and determining factors'.

Improving national institutional capacities

Enhancing national capacity to detect and investigate disinformation campaigns requires developing a robust methodology for identifying problematic media outlets, patterns in the spread of disinformation, and estimates of its impact on national decision-making and public perceptions. This includes approaches that regularly study the tactics and techniques used by disinformation purveyors to manipulate information and artificially amplify its reach. Relevant institutions should collaborate to develop a shared set of indicators commonly used to approximate the impact of disinformation, such as conventional reach metrics, engagement statistics, repetitive opinion polling of experts and citizens, and periodic focus groups.

Implementing preventative measures

The data about the scope and content of the disinformation narratives should inform the creation of preventative measures that limit the impact and demand for disinformation. Building trust in democratic institutions is a key step, which involves providing strategic communication units throughout government ministries with the necessary resources to consistently raise awareness and clarify policy initiatives. These efforts should align with and leverage the tools and mechanisms provided by existing EU laws and policies aimed at improving the quality of the information space.

Enhancing strategic communication

The complexities of place-based policies such as the TJTPs and the various aspects of the just sustainability transitions and the EGD can be challenging for citizens to navigate. Governments should break down interconnected policies and mechanisms into digestible and user-friendly formats. Given the stakes for those in carbon-intensive regions and industries, a key priority should be developing a strategic communication strategy that provides accessible and practical

information for those most affected. This can include interactive online platforms where users can explore various policy measures tailored to their specific circumstances, especially those they can leverage individually or for their businesses. These platforms should also host and update the latest available information on upcoming policy discussions, parliamentary committee meetings, draft laws, and more. It is particularly important to focus these efforts at regional and provincial levels, prioritizing carbon-intensive geographies and labour sectors.

Ultimately, the goal of strategic communication is to systematically provide timely, high-quality, and accessible information about public policy, thereby building long-term political trust. Effectively addressing the demand for information is crucial in minimizing the space for uncertainty, cynicism, and distrust, which can undermine the ability and capacity of authorities to implement policies.

Applying a national and region-specific approach to communication

National and regional authorities should leverage their knowledge and expertise to assess the factors and characteristics of the social groups they target with their communication. This assessment should include historical, socio-political, economic, regulatory, and other relevant aspects of the public environment that can be exploited to form opposing narratives and create conflict structures that promote negative attitudes toward certain policy measures.

Enhancing trust and transparency

Trust and transparency are crucial in spreading information and shaping prevailing narratives related to the EGD and just sustainability transitions. Entrenched 'top-down' dynamics in communication and policy design can hinder bottom-up interaction, jeopardizing participation in the subsequent implementation phases. By adopting more open forms of dialogue, national and regional public actors can foster higher trust and integrity in the just sustainability transition processes, thereby enhancing meaningful public participation. Practically, this can involve organizing live or digital opportunities for public dialogue, where "discursive events" can help shape a new, reformed narrative related to just sustainability transitions.

Misleading narratives that form disinformation patterns in the case study regions can hamper constructive dialogue and ultimately impede the participation of local communities in just sustainability transitions policy-making processes. Fostering a transparent, fact-based and inclusive public discourse can become a valuable tool for promoting democratic participation, leading to more representative and need-specific place-based policies.

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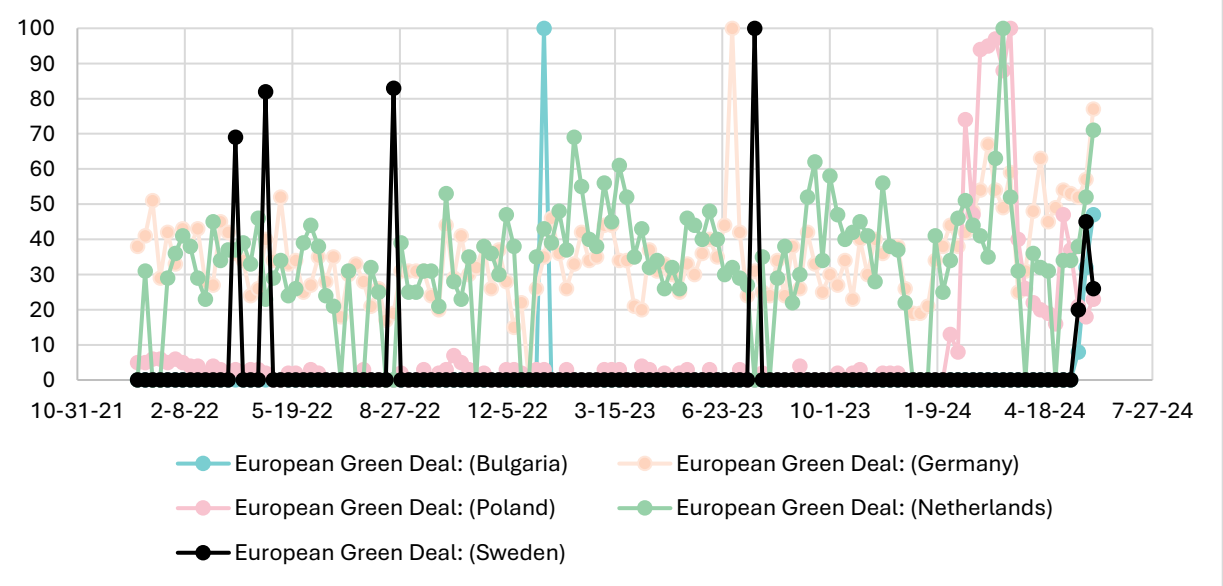
Annexes

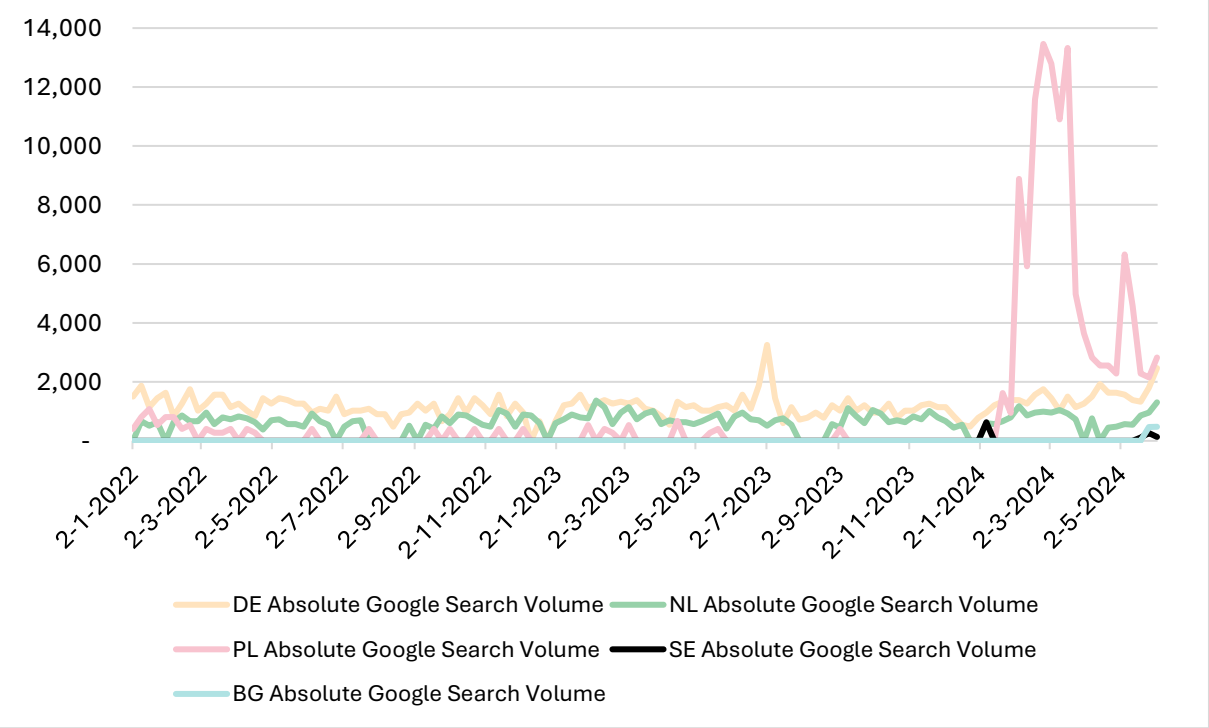
This annex presents additional figures related to key trends from media searches, articles and Facebook posts related to the EGD and JST in the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Poland, Germany and Sweden. They are intended to support the figures and arguments presented in the main text for each case study region.

Figure 9 Google Trends - normalized data for Google searches on the EDG per country per week on a scale of 0 to 100 (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024).



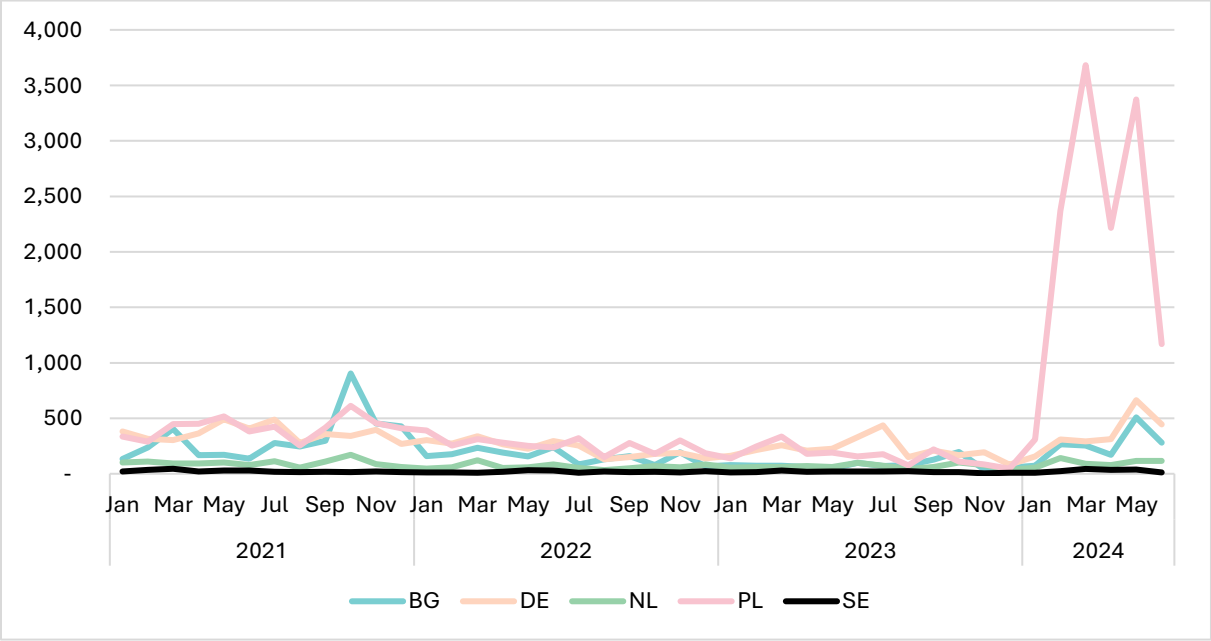
Source: CSD based on data from Google Trends.

Figure 10 Google Trends – absolute number of searches on the EGD per country per week (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024).



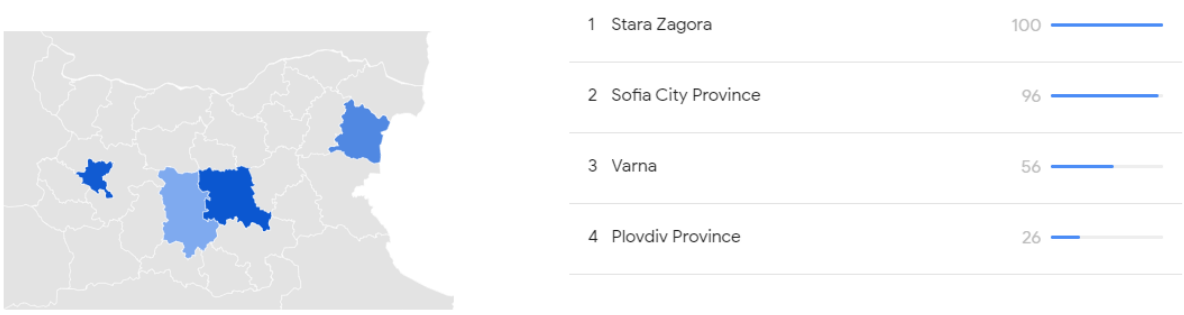
Source: CSD based on data from Google Trends and Glimpse.

Figure 11 Facebook post count on the EGD per country per month (1 Jan 2021 – 31 May 2024).



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika.

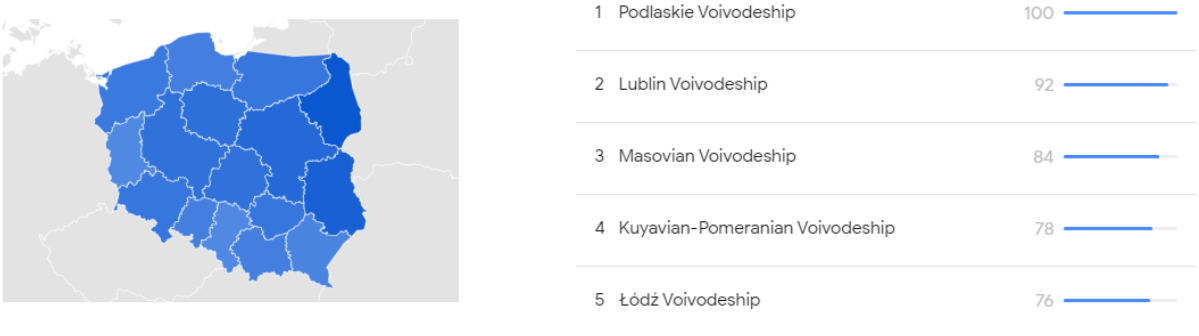
Figure 12 Geographical coverage of relative search interest on the EGD on Google by region in Bulgaria (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024).



Source: CSD based on data from Google Trends and Glimpse.

Values are normalized on a scale from 0 to 100, where 100 is the region with the most popularity as a fraction of total searches in that region. A value of 0 indicates a region where there was not enough data for the search term. Higher values designate a higher proportion of all Google search queries, not a higher absolute count.

Figure 13 Geographical coverage of relative search interest on the EGD on Google by region in Poland (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024).



Source: CSD based on data from Google Trends and Glimpse.

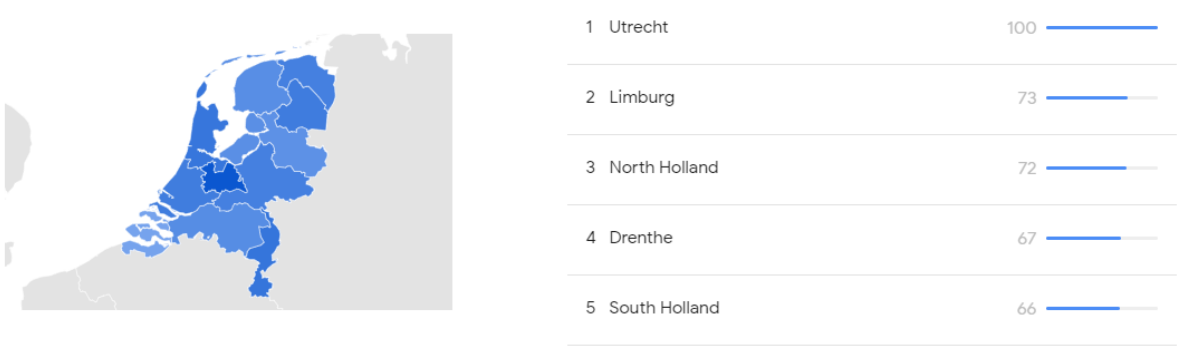
Values are normalized on a scale from 0 to 100, where 100 is the region with the most popularity as a fraction of total searches in that region. A value of 0 indicates a region where there was not enough data for the search term. Higher values designate a higher proportion of all Google search queries, not a higher absolute count.

Figure 14 Geographical coverage of relative search interest on the EGD on Google by region in Sweden (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024).

Source: CSD based on data from Google Trends and Glimpse.

Values are normalized on a scale from 0 to 100, where 100 is the region with the most popularity as a fraction of total searches in that region. A value of 0 indicates a region where there was not enough data for the search term. Higher values designate a higher proportion of all Google search queries, not a higher absolute count.

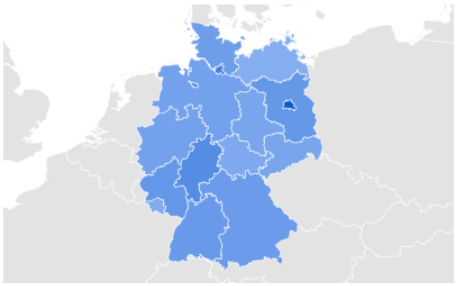
Figure 15 Geographical coverage of relative search interest on the EGD on Google by region in the Netherlands (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024).



Source: CSD based on data from Google Trends and Glimpse.

Values are normalized on a scale from 0 to 100, where 100 is the region with the most popularity as a fraction of total searches in that region. A value of 0 indicates a region where there was not enough data for the search term. Higher values designate a higher proportion of all Google search queries, not a higher absolute count.

Figure 16 Geographical coverage of relative search interest on the EGD on Google by region in Germany (1 Jan 2022 – 31 May 2024).



1	Berlin	100
2	Hamburg	63
3	Bremen	59
4	Hesse	53
5	Rhineland-Palatinate	43

Source: CSD based on data from Google Trends and Glimpse.

Values are normalized on a scale from 0 to 100, where 100 is the region with the most popularity as a fraction of total searches in that region. A value of 0 indicates a region where there was not enough data for the search term. Higher values designate a higher proportion of all Google search queries, not a higher absolute count.