

Future-oriented Regional Transformation Pathways in Central and Eastern Europe

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Central and Eastern European (CEE) regions have historically faced considerable structural challenges. Despite facing path dependencies, they continue to progress and develop alternative development pathways. However, the regions are also at a crucial crossroads in terms of their position in the global geopolitical arena and global production networks. They also face challenges with respect to intense competition from Western and Northern Europe, the U.S., China, Russia, India and other economies, while they also have to respond to multiple societal crises (e.g. increased migration from Ukraine, rising energy prices, ageing population and outmigration of youth, a weaker position in the Global Value Chains and increased environmental problems).

The European Commission has also committed to the long-term sustainable development of the CEE regions through the European Green Deal and fair transition for a decarbonized economy through the Just Transition Fund. However, the implementation of these mandates across the different CEE regions has also been impacted by recent developments, like the global pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, thereby increasing the challenges. Furthermore, as different CEE regions focus on implementing Just Transitions and building socially inclusive futures, there are also multiple future visions on how to bring about regional transformation. Here, the role of power and politics is critical, as regional transformation strategies depend on the local context and the cultural and historical factors unique to each region. The REFRESH research project (<https://www.osu.cz/30003/refresh/>) being carried out at the University of Ostrava, Czechia, is among the pioneering projects that aim at developing future-oriented regional sustainability transformation pathways in Czechia as well as other Central and Eastern European Regions.

The proposed session aims to take the first steps toward developing a deeper understanding of the structural and functional specificities of future regional transformation pathways in Central and Eastern Europe. The session will first provide an overview of the ongoing scientific results from the European Union-funded REFRESH project, followed by open scientific presentations from other experts from diverse Central and Eastern European Regions. The session will conclude with a reflection and discussion about potential future-oriented regional transformation pathways in the CEE regions. The special session invites contributions on the following themes, but is not limited to:

- (1) Decarbonisation of traditional and peripheral industrial regions in Central and Eastern Europe and the impact of the shift towards Just Transition
- (2) The role of Grassroots social innovation, including the role of civil society, environmental organizations and Local Action Groups (LAGs) in supporting regional transformation
- (3) Case studies of successful or failed regional sustainability initiatives in the CEE countries
- (4) Potential impact of future exogenous events such as the Pandemic (COVID-19), conflicts and war (e.g. Russia-Ukraine conflict), increasing energy prices and other geopolitical developments on regional transformation pathways in CEE regions
- (5) Socialist and other institutional legacies shaping the transition contexts and future socio-technical pathways in CEE regions
- (6) The role of EU funding schemes and the impact of new EU budget proposals in influencing regional transformation pathways in CEE regions