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# JUST GREEN TRANSITION IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP. LESSONS FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

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**Abstract.** The Green Deal will be the European Union's main strategy for the following decades to achieve carbon neutrality in its Member States. Yet, to bring about this ambitious goal, European institutions also need to engage with countries located outside the Union's boundaries. The article explores this matter focusing on the relatively unexplored Eastern Partnership (EaP) area (including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). It explores the Western Balkan (WB) experience in the field of green transition, which although not EU members, have initiated their own Green Agenda; in so doing aiming at drawing useful indications on how to set up a wider partnership of shared responsibilities within the EaP. Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining desk-based analysis, comparative assessment of the WB and EaP, and qualitative insights from expert interviews.

**Keywords:** green transition, Eastern Partnership, Western Balkans, roadmap, policy learning.

## Introduction

The European Green Deal (EGD) is the European Union's (EU) long-term transformation framework aimed at climate neutrality by mid-century (EC, 2026). It will reshape economic, social, and governance systems toward environmental sustainability, resilience, and low-carbon development. However, its success depends not only on the EU's independent actions, but also on engagement with neighboring regions. Thus, the EGD 'to be successful, needs to (...) put more focus on the external dimension as an integral part of the Green Deal' (Koch & Keijzer, 2021, p. 4 ) In this respect, the EU's neighboring regions play a fundamental role in achieving climate objectives that are inherently transboundary in nature.

From the Union's external dimension, the article focuses on the EaP, comprising 6 Eastern European (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine) and South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) countries (EC, 2025). The EaP is primarily framed around objectives of '[s]ecurity, stability and prosperity, democracy and rule of law' (EC, 2008), yet addressing shared environmental and climate challenges has become a prominent priority recently. Although the partnership does not impose legally binding climate obligations, it serves as a key platform for supporting

the external delivery of the EGD through policy alignment, technical assistance, and sectoral cooperation (Gródek-Szostak et al., 2024).

One of the focal points of the paper is the experience of the WB,[1] which although not EU members, have launched their own Green Agenda for the Western Balkans[2] (GAWB) aligned with the EGD (RCC, 2020), in the similar context to the EaP. These countries together (EaP and WB) are among the highest GHG emitters relative to economic output when compared to the EU27, with Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Belarus, emerging as the top five contributors (Fig. 1).

Given the similarities in post-socialist legacies, institutional capacity constraints, and EU integration dynamics, the WB stands as a particularly relevant comparative case. In light of this, the paper explores the progress and extent of the GT in the EaP by analyzing its key environmental, socio-economic, governance and institutional challenges, alongside with policy approaches and governing models. By drawing on the WB's experience, the paper aims to identify best practices from context-sensitive cases that can later inform future steps for the EaP. On this basis, the ultimate objective is to shape the Just Green Transition (JGT) Roadmap, which will be serving as a framework to initiate and guide the region's transition process.

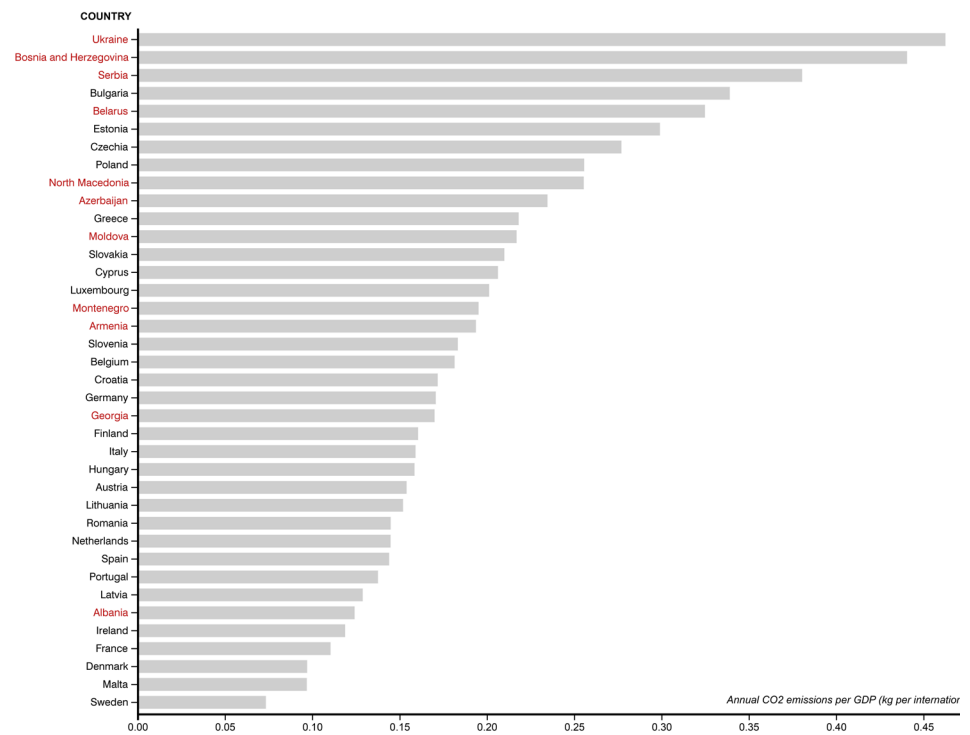


**Figure 1**. Amount of GHG emissions per million dollars of GDP for EU-27, WB and EaP
Note: $CO_2$ emissions from burning fossil fuels and industrial processes. This includes emissions from transport, electricity generation, and heating, but not land-use change.
Source: author's own elaboration based on Our World in Data (2024).

[1] Including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo (EU, 2025).

[2] Co-PLAN is a regional framework adopted by WB in 2020 to align the region with the EGD's carbon neutrality objectives. It supports socio-economic transformation toward a resource-efficient and low-carbon economy (Western Balkans Info Hub, 2024, May 17).

Methodologically, the paper adopts a mixed-method approach, combining desk research, comparative analysis, quantitative assessment, and the semi-structured interviews with WB expert. For extracting insight regarding the implementation challenges and the progress of GAWB, interviews were conducted with experts from regional research and policy institutions, including GreenFORCE, Co-PLAN[3], and Nordregio[4], as well as independent specialists with expertise in green transition in the WB (more specifically, in Albania and North Macedonia). The interviewees represented diverse professional backgrounds in environmental governance, regional development, and policy implementation, and were based in WB and EU Member States. Secondary data from EU policy documents (EU4Climate, 2025; EU4Environment, 2025) and national reports contextualize climate and socio-economic challenges in EaP. The recent implementation reports for the GAWB (RCC, 2024) assess environmental legacies and policy development in the WB. Ultimately, setting a comparative framework across two regions, analyzing policy frameworks, financial mechanisms and governance models, helps to assess the best practice transferability into the EaP context.

The paper's structure follows: the first section outlines environmental context and challenges within the EaP, followed by economic, political, and institutional constraining factors towards the GT. The subsequent section sets a comparative analysis with the WB, identifying shared challenges and distinct factors. Building on these findings, the following section synthesizes lessons from the WB experience and offers policy recommendations tailored to the EaP context. The conclusion reflects on broader policy implications, limitations, and future research directions.

## Conceptualization of the Green Transition

Conceptually, the green transition is rooted in sustainability transition literature, which conceptualizes transformation as a long-term reconfiguration of socio-technical systems, including energy, mobility, industry, and governance (Geels, 2002; Markard et al., 2012). The multi-level perspective explains such transformations as interactions between niche innovations, regime structures, and larger socio-political contexts. From this viewpoint, the transition toward climate neutrality is not merely a matter of policy adjustment, but a systemic shift involving institutional change, technological innovation, and economic restructuring.

Furthermore, transition governance scholarship emphasizes that sustainability transformations require coordination across governance levels and policy domains (Meadowcroft, 2011). Rather than linear reform processes, transitions unfold through iterative experimentation and adaptive governance. In this context, the green transition in the EU's neighboring regions must be understood as a politically mediated and capacity-dependent process shaped by historical legacies, institutional maturity, and geopolitical positioning. In parallel, just transition theory adds an equity dimension to sustainability transitions to mitigate social risks, protect vulnerable groups, and guarantee inclusive participation in restructuring processes. Therefore, the analytical framework adopted in this paper integrates systemic transition theory with governance and justice perspectives for an assessment of how green transition unfolds across heterogeneous political and institutional environments.

More specifically, green transition is conceptualized in this paper as a context-dependent transformation process whose core objectives are shared across the EU, EaP and the WB, but whose governance and institutional modalities, pace, and social inclusion and justice differ,

[3] Institute for Habitat Development is a non-profit organization dedicated to sustainable development and environmental management with experience in research, policy influence, and international cooperation across the WB (Co-PLAN, 2026).

[4] Nordic research institute focused on regional development and spatial planning (Nordregio, 2026).

depending on the institutional, economic and governance capacities of the countries under consideration. Accordingly, the analysis operationalizes the green transition across three interrelated dimensions: policy and regulatory frameworks, governance and institutional capacity, and socio-economic dimension. This framework provides the foundation for developing a JGT roadmap tailored to the EaP context, where flexibility and multi-level governance are fundamental.

Nevertheless, the green transition is neither uniformly defined nor implemented across the EU and the EaP. Within the EU, the green transition is operationalized through the EGD as a legally implemented growth strategy, encompassing climate mitigation and adaptation measures, circular economy, biodiversity protection, energy system transformation, sustainable mobility, and zero-pollution objectives (EC, 2026). This approach is characterized by binding targets, regulatory instruments, financing mechanisms (such as the Just Transition Mechanism and InvestEU) and monitoring, reporting, and verification systems. Importantly, justice-related mechanisms, including territorial cohesion, labor market transitions, and social protection, are explicitly embedded in the EU's green transition framework (UN, 2022).

In contrast, within the EaP, the green transition emerges as a relatively fragmented process of policy diffusion and alignment. Rather than being governed by a single binding framework, it is shaped by EU external action instruments, voluntary commitments, and sector-specific initiatives such as EU4Climate, EU4 Environment, and the EaP Policy beyond 2020 (EC, 2025). In this context, the green transition is understood as a progressive process of environmental governance reforms, emissions reduction, and sustainability-oriented development, constrained by limited institutional capacity, fragmented regulatory frameworks, economic vulnerabilities, and divergent political trajectories. Operationally, EaP countries are undergoing the transition through the national climate strategies, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), long-term low-emission development strategies, and sectoral reforms in energy, transport, waste management, and agriculture. However, implementation remains uneven, mainly due to differences in EU integration pathways, geopolitical positioning, and access to financial and technical resources (OECD, 2024). Compared to the EU, justice-related dimensions (social protection mechanisms, labor market adjustment policies, territorial compensation) remain weakly institutionalized, despite high social vulnerability to transition-related impacts.

## Eastern Partnership

### Environmental Landscape of the EaP Countries

The analysis of the environmental landscape of the EaP countries understands current environmental challenges as the outcome of historically shaped development and institutional legacies (Katcharava, 2024). In post-socialist and transition contexts, environmental degradation is often linked to rapid economic restructuring, weak regulatory frameworks, outdated infrastructure, and delayed institutional adaptation (Gogishvili & Coppola, 2018). These factors determine the scale and type of environmental challenges, such as air pollution, waste mismanagement, and water contamination, which are often characteristics for every EaP country. From this perspective, the environmental landscape is not treated merely as a descriptive baseline, but as a condition that constrains transition pathways and highlights the differentiated starting points of EaP countries within an extended EU region.

Before diving into specificities of the EaP's transition path, existing environmental contexts, policy frameworks and constraints are synthesized for each country. Assessments of national communications on climate change reveal that the common environmental challenges are water, waste and air contamination. Waste management remains a significant challenge, and the lack of proper disposal systems increases air pollution risk. In rural areas, water treatment infrastructure is largely nonexistent, while in urban areas, existing systems are often outdated and can lead to contamination of drinking water supplies (Katcharava, 2024).

Armenia has experienced the impacts of climate change with increased annual mean temperature (1.23°C between 1929–2016), which has intensified drought and expanded affected areas (ME, 2020). Environmental concerns have increased due to rapid economic transition, prevalent constructions, land privatization, and the expansion of mining operations. Similarly to Armenia, Azerbaijan also experienced rapid economic shifts, mass construction of flagship projects and an oil boom, which brought challenges that are further intensified by the climate change factors (average increase of 1.3°C). Industry, transport and power generation are the other major emission contributors (MENR, 2021a, 2021b).

Conversely, Belarus saw emission reduction after independence, which was mostly due to shutting of large industrial plants. Today the main emission contributors are the agriculture and industry. Challenges are observed in waste management which cross-contaminates drinking water and air quality (MNREP, 2025).

For Georgia, market transition was the first major accelerator for environmental challenges. Early 90's demolition of tram trolleys was followed by increased motorization and car ownership, which along with a pure fuel quality, became the main sources of air pollution (MEPA, 2021).

Similarly to Georgia, vehicles, as well as industry and energy sectors are the main contributors of air contamination in Moldova. Water state is also challenging, predominantly in rural parts, where only 17% of the population are accessed by water supplies (Katcharava, 2024). Solid waste has seen roughly 70% increase in recent years (Seremet, 2020), yet only 10% of landfills are officially authorized.

Lastly, Ukraine is already facing the climate change impacts (predicted increase of 2.5–3°C). While other countries are working to mitigate and adapt to the climate emergency, Ukraine faces a different reality: the ongoing war is steadily depleting its natural resources and constraining the country's capacity for future climate adaptation. Direct impacts are immediately visible, including the destruction of ecosystems, forests, wetlands, and infrastructure, with national assessments indicating that over 30% of protected natural areas have been affected by hostilities (OECD, 2022). Indirect impacts (air pollution, multi-level water contamination), while harder to quantify in the short term, are expected to have long-term transboundary effects and will spill over the European neighbors.

## Constraints for the Green Transition

However, there are certain constraints for the green transition that need to be accounted for. In environmental aspect issues steam mainly because of the climate change. According to EU4Climate assessments, vulnerability to climate impacts has intensified, particularly affecting the agricultural sector, water resources, and forestry systems. Another pressing factor is the decline in forest cover, necessary for emission reduction. The main drivers of the loss are illegal logging and the climate change impacts.

Among the governance-related constraints, political divergence within the partnership is a fundamental challenge, as different levels of integration with the EU shape the degree of commitment to climate-related reforms. In particular, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, due to their Association Agreement[5], reveal stronger commitments to Agenda implementation. By contrast, countries with looser institutional ties to the EU tend to showcase slower policy uptake (EP, 2019).

In case of institutional arrangements, state institutions for climate change are often absent. Responsibility for the related topic is frequently assigned to a single official or unit within an institution, who is simultaneously responsible for multiple, unrelated policy areas. The limited availability of specialized personnel constrains the capacity to tackle the complexity and scale of green transition (Augustyn et al., 2022).

Important challenge arises from the gap between the climate change issues and their inclusion in the regulatory documents and sectoral programs (Berisha et al., 2026). Low-carbon measures exist sectorally and the coordination among them is weak. In the Armenian context, fragmented planning structures constrain coherent coordination of climate-related policy initiatives (ME, 2020). Incoherent frameworks and weak coordination at national level leads to the lack of a common vision on the partnership level - and thus, insufficient cooperation at the regional level.

Low level of economic development in EaP countries and the lack of investments must be considered, as the short-term development pressures (such as basic service provision, poverty, unemployment) often dominate on long-term environmental objectives.

Limited social awareness constitutes another barrier. For instance, in Azerbaijan, the major challenge to implementing 'Climate Smart Agriculture' is linked to societal barriers and a low awareness of new technologies (MENR, 2021a). In technological constraints challenges appear related to the Soviet carbon-intensive industries, low skilled labors, energy dependency, and insufficient monitoring systems. For example, Coal continues to be an important component of Ukraine's energy mix, accounting for approximately 70% of primary energy consumption (Berisha et al., 2026). While outdated technologies (filtration mechanisms and mine managements) are added built-up challenges.

Moreover, energy dependency is one of the major constraints of the EaP. Many countries are unable to fully satisfy national energy demand[6], positioning them as dependent on energy imports (IEA, 2021). For energy refurbishment issues arise from the old (Soviet era) housing with weak energy-efficiency standards. Insufficient monitoring systems are the other obstacle. Successful operationalization of actions and analysis and assessment of impacts require regularly updated data. For example, in Armenia, forestry-related initiatives are currently on hold due to insufficient data to produce a reliable analysis.

Political instability should be accounted for, as the recent conflicts in Ukraine and Karabakh have contributed to the increased emissions; Assessment by the (PSI, 2025, February 24) indicates that the war in Ukraine has produced almost 230 million tons of $CO_2$-equivalent GHG emissions since February 2022 (driven by warfare, infrastructure destruction, and related fires) – a level similar to the combined annual emissions of Austria, Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia.

[5] Agreement with Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova. European Commission, adopted 27 June 2014 (EC, 2014).

[6] Armenia – 27% of energy demand is covered with domestic energy production (2020); Azerbaijan – records the highest level of energy self-sufficiency in the EaP; Belarus –15% of the energy demand was met by domestic production (2018); Georgia – domestic energy generation satisfies roughly one-fifth of total energy demand (2020); Moldova – approximately 20% of total energy demand is met through domestic production; Ukraine – around 65% of overall energy demand is satisfied through domestic energy production.

## Progress in Adopting Green Policies and Initiatives

Starting from the first years of independence, the EaP countries have progressively integrated green policies into their national strategies. Despite the constraints encountered (ranging from political to economic), each country has taken steps toward environmental governance reform, emissions reduction, and sustainable development (Fig. 2). The EU has played a big role in influencing this transition by introducing policy instruments, agreements, frameworks and initiatives, such as the EGD, EU4Climate, etc. However, progress remains uneven, often hindered by structural barriers, policy fragmentation, and weak regional cooperation. Notwithstanding these constraints, all six EaP countries have showcased measurable progress in green transition policy implementation at the national level, yet while individual efforts are acknowledged, the primary focus of the paper remains on a partnership level.

Analyzing the policy development timeline for the EaP, different EU funded initiatives, such as EU4Climate and EU4 Environment, are aligning with the agenda by having common objectives of achieving reduced emissions. Yet, the EaP policy beyond 2020 (EU4Digital, 2020, March 19) is the one that directly supports its delivery within the partnership and operates with a long-term objective of achieving climate resilience. Initiatives such as air quality management, waste system reform, sustainable urban mobility, energy efficiency, and coal phase-down projects, are acting together with a common objective to lowering emissions and supporting alignment with the EU's zero-pollution objectives.

However, the disparity persists in both the level of implementation and the degree of political commitment within the EaP, largely reflecting their divergent political trajectories. In particular, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine demonstrate a comparatively more structured and institutionalized approach to climate policy integration, as their respective agreements entail alignment with and implementation of EGD commitments. Moldova has already revised its environmental policy framework, introducing a new economic model and a sustainable development roadmap to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 (Moldpres, 2023). Similarly, Ukraine has introduced advanced monitoring systems and the Energy Strategy 2035 to increase net-zero buildings, and approved the Transport Strategy 2030 (MON, 2023). Georgia has taken a regional approach, joining the Green Agenda project, alongside Armenia and Azerbaijan. This initiative, spanning over three years, is tasked to develop the climate-neutral roadmap for 2050, focusing on smart mobility, circular economy, food chains, biodiversity conservation, and energy efficiency (CENN, 2023).

EU cooperation takes a fundamental role in this progress. For instance, through policy harmonization, the EU4Climate has provided support to establish monitoring, reporting, and verification systems (EU/UNDP, 2022), integrate gender mainstreaming into climate policies, and introduce sector-specific decarbonization strategies. However, while some EaP countries have successfully used this support, others remain constrained by internal political dynamics that limit full engagement. In particular, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Belarus exhibit a more unstable alignment trend, largely due to their geopolitical positioning and the dominance of Russian-controlled energy supply networks. Therefore, attempts to modernize the energy sector have not been successfully implemented. The Belarus context is particularly challenged, whereas concerns revolve around uncertainties that the carbon tax might make their domestic products less competitive. Additionally, there are concerns about a potential decline in demand for petroleum products, which represent an important export to the EU (Tsebenko et al., 2023).

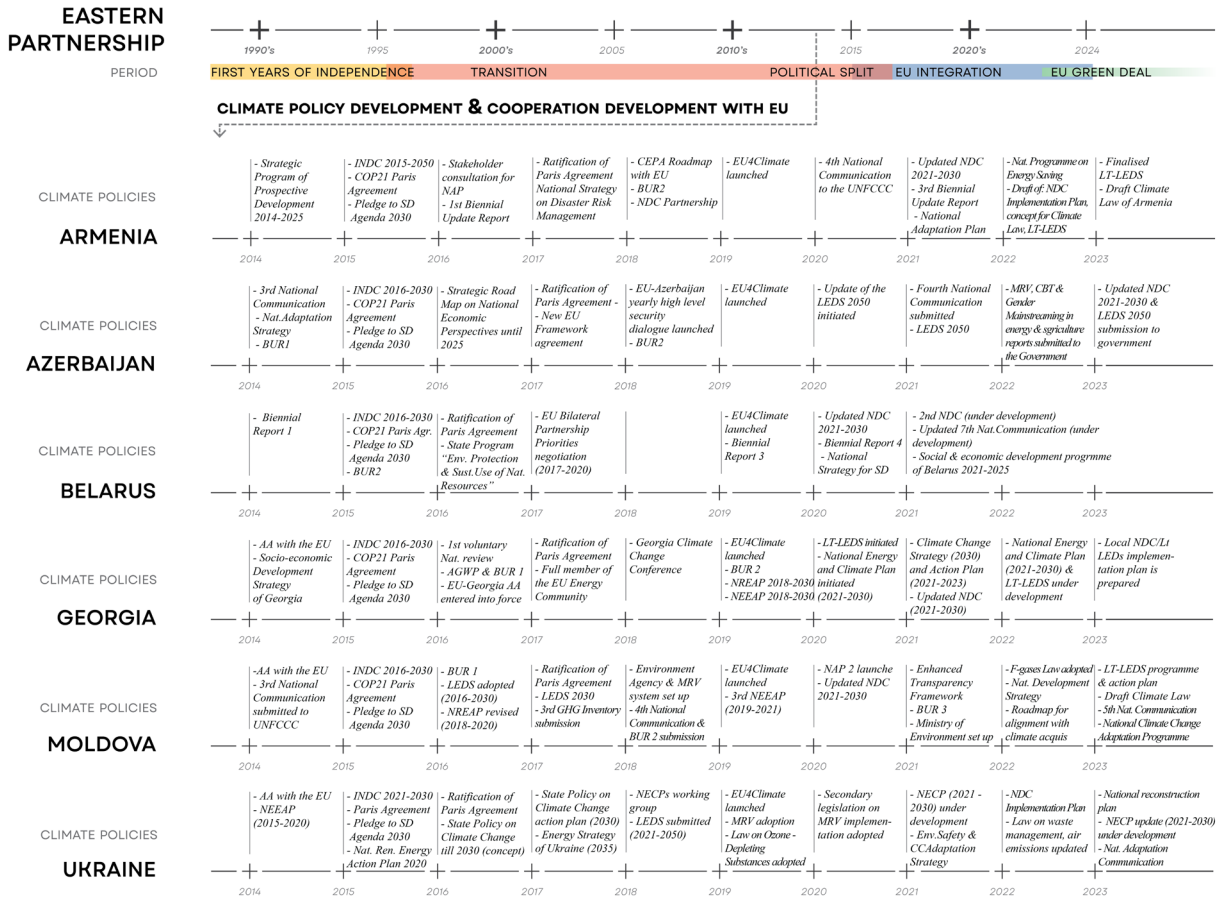


**Figure 2.** Climate Policy and Cooperation Development among the EaP and EU
Source: author's own elaboration based on Katcharava (2024).

## Western Balkan Case Study and Comparative Analysis with the EaP

The primary reason for selecting the WB region concerns its recent socio-economic and political developments, as well as the environmental and structural challenges stemming from a development trajectory similar to that of the EaP countries. Additionally, its pathway toward a green transition – along with the challenges faced and successes achieved – offers valuable insights. The comparative analysis explains how early post-socialist reforms created path dependencies that continue to shape governance capacities and environmental outcomes in both regions. However, there are shared as well as distinctive features between these two contexts (Fig. 3).

The beginning of independence was a critical juncture for both the EaP and WB. Following the dissolution of the USSR, the EaP countries and the former Yugoslavia went through a tumultuous set of changes that fueled conflicts in both contexts. In the WB, the initial period focused on state-building activity coordinated by international conventions and agreements that helped to define borders. Controversially, the EaP's longer conflicts delayed their rebuilding process. In both regions, conflicts led to population displacement and prolonged instability, with fragmented civil societies with scarce levels of participation in the governance processes. Prolonged conflict delayed institutional consolidation and weakened public trust in governance systems.

The following transition from socialist to democratic systems necessitated the establishment of new institutional frameworks separating state administration from party structures and replacing centralized economic planning with market-based systems. This phase proved difficult due to the necessity of introducing foundational reforms and new administrative practices to overcome institutional legacies of the communist system. This stage was characterized by fragile governance structures and constrained institutional capacity. States faced the dual challenge of building administrative systems and simultaneously addressing the socio-economic consequences of recent conflicts. This phase reflects a classic case of institutional layering, where new democratic structures were superimposed on weak administrative foundations (Katcharava, 2024).

In succeeding transition period, the two regions moved towards market economy through rapid attempts to privatize formerly nationalized assets and this way attract the investments. Land reforms and socioeconomic restructuring were introduced starting from the second half of the 1990s, to consolidate national economies and encourage foreign investment, which ultimately led to the transfer of collective farms, manufacturing facilities, and industrial assets into private ownership. The period showcased a lack of preparedness of institutional bodies and planning frames, which was further exacerbated by corruption and prevalence of informality. The privatization wave's impacts were the most noticeable in urban contexts where the major cities in the regions saw gentrification to accommodate the growing real estate market.

The period of 2005–2010 could be perceived as a pivotal time for both contexts, as their paths began to diverge after similar political, social, and governance challenges. The WB countries began to secure spots on candidate lists for the EU membership earlier. In contrast, the integration of EaP states progressed more gradually and was influenced by conflicts in Ukraine, as well as the nature of their bilateral arrangements with the EU (Katcharava, 2024).

Despite different geographical contexts, the two regions went through the similar developmental paths for their first 25 years of post-independence. Governance structures and institutional capacity remained weak; regulatory frameworks prioritized rapid economic transition and investment attraction, which lead to unregulated natural resource exploitation. Challenges intensified in subsequent transition period, with observed forest and land cover changes, biodiversity loss, urban sprawl, weak waste management, air and water contamination,

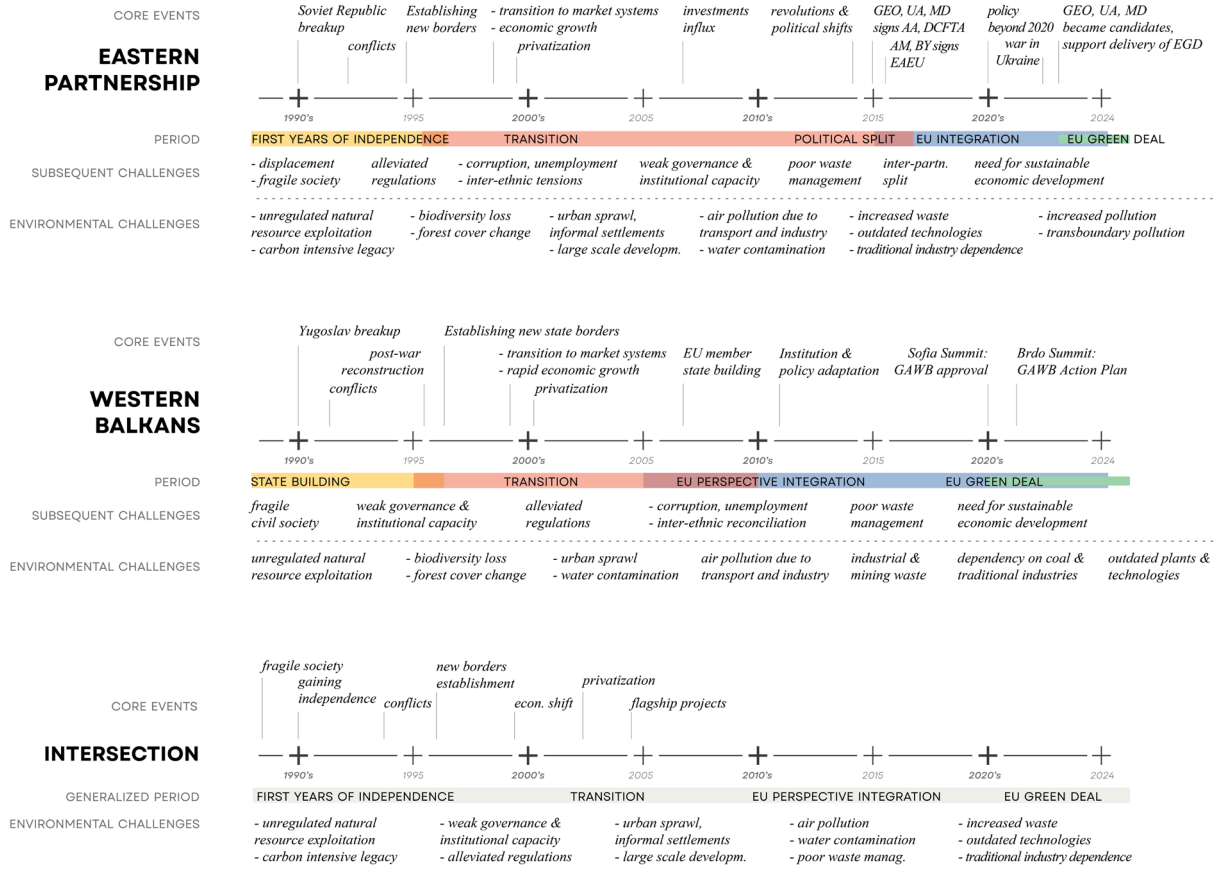


**Figure 3.** Interconnected Temporal Timeline of the WB and EaP
Source: author's own elaboration based on Katcharava (2024), OECD (2024) and Gogishvili and Coppola (2018).

and carbon-intensive industries, many of which still remains pertinent. Early decisions created long-lasting environmental vulnerabilities that continue to constrain present-day transition capacity.

Urban expansion and the transition to market-based economies had severe ecological consequences. Economic liberalization reshaped urban areas with increased pressure on public green areas and uncontrolled urban sprawl. Weak planning frameworks rise informal construction, while aging housing stock deteriorated because of insufficient investment in rehabilitation. These dynamics placed additional strain on essential infrastructure systems, including heating, water supply, and waste management.

Air pollution in both areas was largely due to transportation and mining plants, which exploited low-quality coal and became the major sources of health concerns. For the transportation, the matter was linked to the impot of aged and highly polluting vehicles, mainly chosen for their affordability.

A central challenge, although more definite in the WB, is the coal dependency. Insufficient air filtration and wastewater treatment capacities in the plants lead to cross-contamination of water and soil sources. At the same time, traditional sectors remain key sources of employment in the region, which further increases the social vulnerability for the green transition shift.

The post-independence has brought up similar environmental challenges for both regions. Despite the 10-year gap of initiating the EU integration process, both regions continue to face similar environmental issues. Illegal dumping and landfilling, as the dominant waste management strategy, constitute a shared challenge across all EaP and WB countries. Waste collection is inadequate particularly in rural parts, where water sanitation and decaying infrastructure cross-contaminate between sewage and water sources. Many urban centers lack sufficient wastewater treatment infrastructure, whereas such service systems are frequently absent in rural areas. Lastly the emissions trend presents a shared issue between these regions, where medium and smaller-sized countries, when considered their $CO_2$ emissions in relation to their economic output, emerge as disproportionately high contributors within the EU 27 (cf. Fig. 1).

## Differing Geopolitical Contexts

A constraint on green transition governance within the EaP derives from its pronounced geopolitical heterogeneity. Unlike the WB, where EU accession conditionality functions as a relatively cohesive external force for regulatory approximation and institutional reform (Börzel & Risse, 2012), the EaP is characterized by differentiated integration pathways and competing geopolitical orientations (Delcour, 2015). Georgia has followed Euro-Atlantic integration and regulatory convergence with the EU, including environmental alignment within its state modernization strategy. Moldova has accelerated legislative harmonization and institutional reforms, particularly after succeeding its candidate status. Ukraine, especially in the context of Russia's invasion, frames alignment with the EGD as part of a reconstruction and energy security agenda, and links decarbonization with autonomy from Russian energy dependence (UN, 2024, June 12).

In contrast, Armenia maintains a hybrid geopolitical positioning with the EU under the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (EU, 2021). Azerbaijan, could be categorized as a hydrocarbon-exporting state, which prioritizes energy sovereignty and autonomy and maintains a more selective engagement with EU climate conditionality and norms (Koch & Keijzer, 2021). On the other hand, Belarus pursues political and economic alignment with Russia and keeps limited engagement with EU instruments, thus demonstrates the lowest degree of regulatory convergence in environmental and climate governance (Delcour, 2015).

Above discussed geopolitical asymmetry limits a unified regional climate framework. Commitments to green transition objectives are filtered through different security priorities, energy dependencies, and alignments, which are reducing the extent of soft coordination instruments that characterize the EaP architecture. Consequently, geopolitical fragmentation in the EaP constitutes not merely contextual background but a structural determinant shaping the coherence of climate governance, in contrast to the comparatively accession-driven and conditionality-based integration dynamic of the WB.

Nevertheless, the EaP remains the main tool to manage relationships between these countries and enhance their green transition at a regional level; Meaning that they should approach climate challenges as part of a shared responsibility within a broader partnership framework, rather than through isolated national approaches. The added value of a concerted regional approach derives from the structural characteristics of environmental governance and the political economy of transition processes. First, many environmental externalities in the EaP region are inherently transboundary: shared river basins (e.g., Kura-Aras, Dniester), cross-border air pollution flows, and biodiversity corridors cannot be successfully managed through isolated national policies. Second, coordinated policy frameworks improve access to climate finance and technical assistance, as regional platforms increase bargaining leverage vis-à-vis the EU and international financial institutions. Pooling administrative expertise and policy learning mechanisms is particularly relevant in contexts of limited institutional capacity, as observed in EaP's context. And finally, in a geopolitically fragmented context, multilateral cooperation within the EaP framework functions as a stabilizing governance mechanism that can partially buffer external political pressures and maintain continuity in climate-related commitments. Thus, despite internal heterogeneity, regional coordination generates functional, economic, and governance efficiencies that cannot be achieved through purely national approaches.

## Policy Framework and Priorities

The EaP and WB follow different pathways in their transition processes; however, both are shaped by EU environmental directives as part of accession-related requirements. The WB has developed an Agenda aligned with the objectives of the EGD and adapted to the region's specific economic, environmental, and political conditions. In contrast, while no single tailored framework exists for the EaP, comparable priorities are incorporated across various EU initiatives.

The WB approach to policy implementation has materialized in initiatives, including the adoption of EU-aligned energy efficiency measures, air and water quality regulation, and biodiversity protection policies. It is observed that both regions' focus is on energy efficiency, renewable with modernizing energy legislation and investment mobilization. As well as on transport sector, with increasing rail capacity and environmentally friendly transport modes to reduce the carbon footprint. For depolluting strategy, although attention is given in both contexts, the WB benefits from the alignment with EU environmental acquis, thus, it has seen a more unified.

## Barriers to Policy Implementation

Numerous overlapping and unique features arise when identifying barriers in both regions; Institutional weaknesses impede the transition measures. As detailed in the 'Report on Western Balkans Just Green Transition Conceptualisation' (Toto et al., 2023), accelerated transition did not result in the consolidation of strong institutions, which generated a governance capacity gap.

Financial aspects, also impede the process to overcome basic needs and attract investments. The WB experts highlighted the grants preference, which points about economic uncertainty. While in case of the EaP, limited financing impacts the provision of basic services like water treatment and waste management (Berisha et al., 2026).

Levels of societal readiness and engagement remain limited in both regions. Historical centralization in the WB 'has weakened public participation, as confirmed through low stakeholder engagement scores in interviews' (Katcharava, 2024, p. 113). Similarly, the EaP also shows weak public engagement and insufficient information sharing on environmental topics, as demonstrated by the EU4Climate reports.

On the other hand, political instability is manifesting differently in two regions. In WB, administrative leadership shifts hamper effectiveness of strategies. While in EaP, varying political orientations influence the transition path itself. Yet, corruption and low transparency pose further obstacles to policy implementation in both contexts. Moreover, technological constraints such as the burden of outdated and carbon-intensive industries should also be accounted for, as they limit the adoption of cleaner technologies.

## Governance and Institutional Capacities

This section is analytically grounded in the multi-level governance framework, which conceptualizes green transition as a process co-produced across supranational, national, and sub-national levels through vertical coordination and horizontal collaboration (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). In parallel, it draws on network governance theory, which emphasizes the role of inter-organizational platforms and policy networks in leading transitions.

The governance framework established for implementing the GAWB is grounded in regional cooperation, multi-actor participation, and cross-sectoral coordination. From an MLG perspective, this model represents a shift from hierarchical steering toward polycentric governance, where authority is distributed across interconnected institutional nodes rather than concentrated within a single level. The core of this system is the regional ownership, realized through the involvement of WB authorities across multiple policy areas. The latter is operationalized through the 'Regional Working Group on Environment' (RWG Env, 2018), which helps for continuous policy dialogue on climate action. Together with other regional coordinators, the latter is responsible for different aspects of the action plan. This constitutes a central component of the governance structure, supported by the Southeast Europe Biodiversity Taskforce, which advises on biodiversity matters (RWG Env, 2018).

A key element of the governance mechanism is cross-sectoral cooperation, facilitated by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)[7]. Within network governance theory, such platforms function as coordination arenas that reduce fragmentation, align sectoral priorities, and facilitate policy learning across administrative boundaries. RCC presents a cooperation platform for WB, EU Commission, regional bodies, and other stakeholders, and secures an up-to-date decision-making based on the latest developments and needs (RCC, 2025a). Moreover, platforms like the NGO's Forum and the Green Agenda Days provide space for knowledge sharing and vertical coordination and helps to incorporate diverse perspectives at different levels of governance. Lastly, the Donor Coordination platform set up annual meetings to streamline financial support, identify priorities, and discuss financial needs (Katcharava, 2024, p. 117). Collaboration among Western Balkan countries plays an important role in tackling cross-border environmental problems. The established

[7] RCC is a regionally owned framework to facilitate cooperation and EU integration across South East Europe, with a participation from Western Balkan countries, EU institutions, and other partners (RCC, 2026).

communication structures, supported by ministerial-level meetings and reporting systems, strengthen accountability and create a structured mechanism for tracking and evaluating progress.

To establish a comparable governance framework, the EaP policy most closely aligned with the EGD, the 'beyond 2020' framework was selected for analysis**.** Unlike the WB model, its structure corresponds to a soft coordination, with non-binding instruments and limited enforcement capacity, which weakens vertical integration across different levels. Its key components include the state head level summits, official meetings, Civil Society Forum, and working groups on environment. These forums function as platforms for policy dialogue, incorporation of civil society perspectives, and advancement of targeted initiatives. The regulatory basis is reinforced through joint working documents and climate-related declarations.

EaP and WB methodologies and structures differ; The WB governance has a structured approach, with a reinforced cross-sectoral collaboration that supports the alignment with emerging needs and frameworks. Its institutional extent is consistent with MLG theory, which associates stronger policy outcomes with tighter vertical and horizontal linkages. Contrastingly, the EaP's framework lacks the centralized coordination and appears less targeted. In terms of institutional capacities, despite both regions encountering the issues, the WB benefits from the EU capacity building support.

Another dimension concerns the regulatory architecture for climate action. Within the EaP, the absence of a consolidated framework weakens the coherence of both national and cross-border green transition strategies. From a governance capacity perspective, regulatory fragmentation translates into weak policy feedback loops and low administrative learning. Contrariwise, the WB has a more integrated strategy for implementing diverse measures, thanks to its tailored agenda.

Regarding financial coordination, the EaP faces constraints stemming from the lack of clearly defined mechanisms at both national and regional levels. This stands in contrast to the WB, where the Donor Coordination Platform convenes annual meetings to align funding flows, set priorities, and coordinate discussions on financial aspects.

## Lessons from the Western Balkans

This section is analytically grounded in Just Transition theory, place-based development, and policy transfer literature, which collectively explain how transition practices can be adapted rather than replicated across diverse socio-institutional contexts. The preceding synthesis of lessons derived from the comparative analysis aims to incorporate them into a structured framework for future policymaking within the EaP's green transition. It first outlines successful practices from the WB and then formulates recommendations for their contextual adaptation to the EaP. Accordingly, these lessons are intended to inform subsequent policy design and strategic development, organized across four interrelated stages: preparation, planning, implementation, and monitoring. Specific strategies, policies, and actions within the WB are aligned with the broader framework to ensure coherence to the specific context. The section relies on interviews with experts, as well as on the Report on WBs JGT Conceptualization and the GAWB Action Plan Implementation Report (RCC, 2022).

## Theoretical frameworks for adaptation of Place-Based and Inclusive Approaches

The conceptualization report (Co-PLAN, 2023) together with expert interviews indicates that prioritizing place-based and inclusive approaches is essential. Place-based development theory (Faggian & Urso, 2023) emphasizes that sustainable transitions must build upon territorially embedded assets, institutional capacities, and social capital rather than uniform policy templates.

According to expert assessments, the uptake of smart specialization and place-based innovation strategies is gaining momentum across the region. From a regional innovation systems perspective, these strategies operationalize place-based development by mobilizing local knowledge and entrepreneurial networks. These approaches leverage local entrepreneurial capacities to stimulate innovative green transition initiatives and play a key role in tailoring governance structures to local contexts.

Moreover, the Quintuple Helix model is regarded as an approach that integrates environmental considerations directly into decision-making processes. It expands traditional innovation systems by embedding environmental capital as a core governance actor and internalizes sustainability into policy co-creation. This model demonstrates the co-design process where diverse stakeholders are considered in governance frameworks. The latter confirms a relative holistic tactic to sustainability.

WB have emphasized the development of place-based and inclusive models grounded in local assets and active stakeholder participation. Embedding such approaches into policy formulation may serve as a reference for other regions planning own sustainable transitions. The EaP could adopt a similar methodology by encouraging local governance actors to design green transition strategies aligned with territorial specificities and are adapted to different contexts, rather than imported (Katcharava, 2024).

## Financial Strategies and Incentives

The WB experience shows that dependence on external funding necessities financial planning improvement. According to the GAWB implementation report, progress has been uneven due to implementation delays and funding constraints. Nonetheless, several practices emerging from their experience may be transferable to the EaP context.

Within the GAWB framework, the Donor Coordination Platform operates as a mechanism for optimizing financial flows. It aligns funding streams with priorities and promotes efficient and transparent allocation of resources. It acts as a centralized coordination hub, consolidates contributions from multiple international donors, reduces duplication across projects, and makes sure that initiatives receive appropriate financial support. Additionally, it improves transparency by clarifying the allocation and use of funds. Overall, the platform streamlines financial management and strengthens alignment between available resources and environmental objectives, to support the initiatives under the green transition theme.

Moreover, as pointed out by various interviewees, the diversification n of funding is a crucial aspect, including public-private cooperation, European instruments and innovative financing mechanisms (Katcharava, 2024). Lowering dependency on a single source of funding may be a pre-condition for improving financial resilience. As for example, public-private partnerships bring together the efficiency of the private sector with the public sector's support, which generate solutions that neither sector could achieve autonomously. Similarly, green bonds can reach a range of investors, while environmental taxes could generate steady revenue that can be reinvested to create a self-sustaining cycle in sustainability.

## Techniques for Stakeholder Engagement

According to the GAWB Implementation Report, public consultations and workshops are utilized to engage diverse stakeholder groups, including government representatives, academic institutions, and civil society organizations. These forums facilitate information exchange and support collaborative approaches to policy formulation. The Action Plan presents multi-stakeholder forums, which bring together the civil society, public and private sectors to coordinate future actions. They integrate stakeholder feedback into policy design and ensure that strategies are reflective of collective needs. Furthermore, the Action Plan highlights capacity-building initiatives to bridge knowledge gaps by transferring the necessary skills for implementing green technologies. Overall, makes sure that policies are supported by the communities they affect and proposes a practice that can be adapted in EaP (Katcharava, 2024).

Moreover, stakeholder engagement should be tailored to the cultural contexts of EaP countries, taking into account locally embedded communication patterns and social norms. This may involve developing culturally responsive awareness and educational campaigns that reflect regional traditions and initiatives consistent with local practices. Such inclusive approaches can enhance policy legitimacy, strengthen public trust in socially fragmented settings, and foster broader societal support for green transition initiatives.

## Public Awareness and Inclusive Policy-Making

The experts have stressed the 'participatory policy-making processes that include all stakeholders, such as the local communities, NGOs, businesses, and the academia. For that the first step is to launch public awareness campaigns to increase understanding and support for the green transition process and train the workforce for building societal support and operational capacity' (Katcharava, 2024, p. 125). An illustrative example is the Skills Development for Employment program in (UNDP, 2023), which stresses out the relevance of integrating requalification, stakeholder involvement, awareness and educational offerings in employment strategies. It's aligned with the National Employment and Skills Strategy and improves vocational education and training (VET)[8] through institutional reforms. The latter also ensures that the offerings are aligned with local needs and EU standards through the VET providers.

## Collaborating Diverse Political Alignments

As previously stated, the diverse integration and political alignments can potentially hamper the green transition. This challenge can be explained using differentiated integration theory, which suggests that countries with different political priorities can still work toward common goals if cooperation is flexible and allows for different speeds and levels of participation, rather than requiring the same commitments from all partners (InDivEU, 2025). Therefore, it is fundamental for EU policy frameworks to foresee the variable degrees of integration. They should adopt a modular structure and enable countries to engage at varying levels depending on their current political orientation. Accordingly, creating forums and platforms that facilitate consensus-building among EaP is recommended. Such mechanisms can support the exchange of best practices, joint discussion of shared challenges, and strengthening of regional trust. Furthermore, regional initiatives (e.g. cross-border environmental monitoring and joint management projects) should be promoted, as they can provide a neutral platform for cooperation without requiring complete

[8] VET is a practice-oriented component of education and skills systems that provides learners with practical and theoretical skills and facilitates transitions into the labor market through close links with employers and work-based learning (Kuczera, 2025).

policy harmonization. Regional awards and grant programs could be introduced to encourage collaboration toward joint environmental objectives and initiatives.

### Improving Regional Cooperation

Regional cooperation can provide a unified approach to common challenges. From a multi-level governance perspective, regional platforms act as intermediary governance layers that translate supranational climate objectives into territorially embedded implementation practices. To this end, the recommended strategy is to establish a regional framework for cooperation, which can share the best practices, resources and data. An example in WB is the RCC, whose approach encompasses monitoring mechanisms, donor coordination, partnership-building, and communication strategies to foster regional cooperation across multiple sectors. In detail, the RCC includes the monitoring and reporting mechanisms such as the Balkan Barometer, [9] and SecuriMeter, [10] which guarantee that initiatives are reflective to regional needs and helps to implement SDG aligned projects with optimized resources. The RCC's approach to form partnerships across sectors (NGOs, international organizations) operationalize collaborative governance by integrating knowledge systems into regional initiatives. Besides, the Communication Strategy promotes the benefits of regional cooperation and could serve as blueprint for EaP by providing an approach to share practices, resources, and data, and strengthen a regional approach to environmental challenges.

## Green Transition Roadmap Development and Applicability to EaP Context

Following the assessment of best practices and recommendations drawn from the WB experience, the focus should shift toward a broader examination of how the green transition process is structured and how it can be adapted to the heterogeneous context of the EaP. As a fundamental part of the examining the applicability extents, the narrative recalls the already defined regional peculiarities. Among these factors, the risk relates to frequent government changes, political instability, and unresolved conflicts, which may undermine sustained commitment to green transition initiatives. The flow breaks down the roadmap into sequential preparatory, planning, implementation, and monitoring phases (Fig. 4). This roadmap is grounded in transition management theory, which conceptualizes sustainability transitions as iterative, multi-actor processes structured around phases of problem framing, visioning, experimentation, and reflexive monitoring (Frantzeskaki, 2022).

### Preparation

Applicability of the green transition framework must be adjusted to the unique regional specificities of member states in EaP. Distinct political and economic contexts and cultural specificities create both challenges and opportunities for these countries. Thus, the framework needs to be adaptable and flexible to accommodate degrees of EU integration and geopolitical contexts within the region. The most modifications are anticipated during the preparation phase. Initially the framework should integrate mechanisms that permit for diverse levels of engagement. It should be designed

[9] Balkan Barometer – an annual survey of public and business perspectives across the WB to explore socioeconomic and political trends (RCC, 2025a).

[10] SecuriMeter – pioneering regional Public Opinion Survey, which presents citizens' views on crime, border security, irregular migration, corruption, and so on (RCC, 2025b).

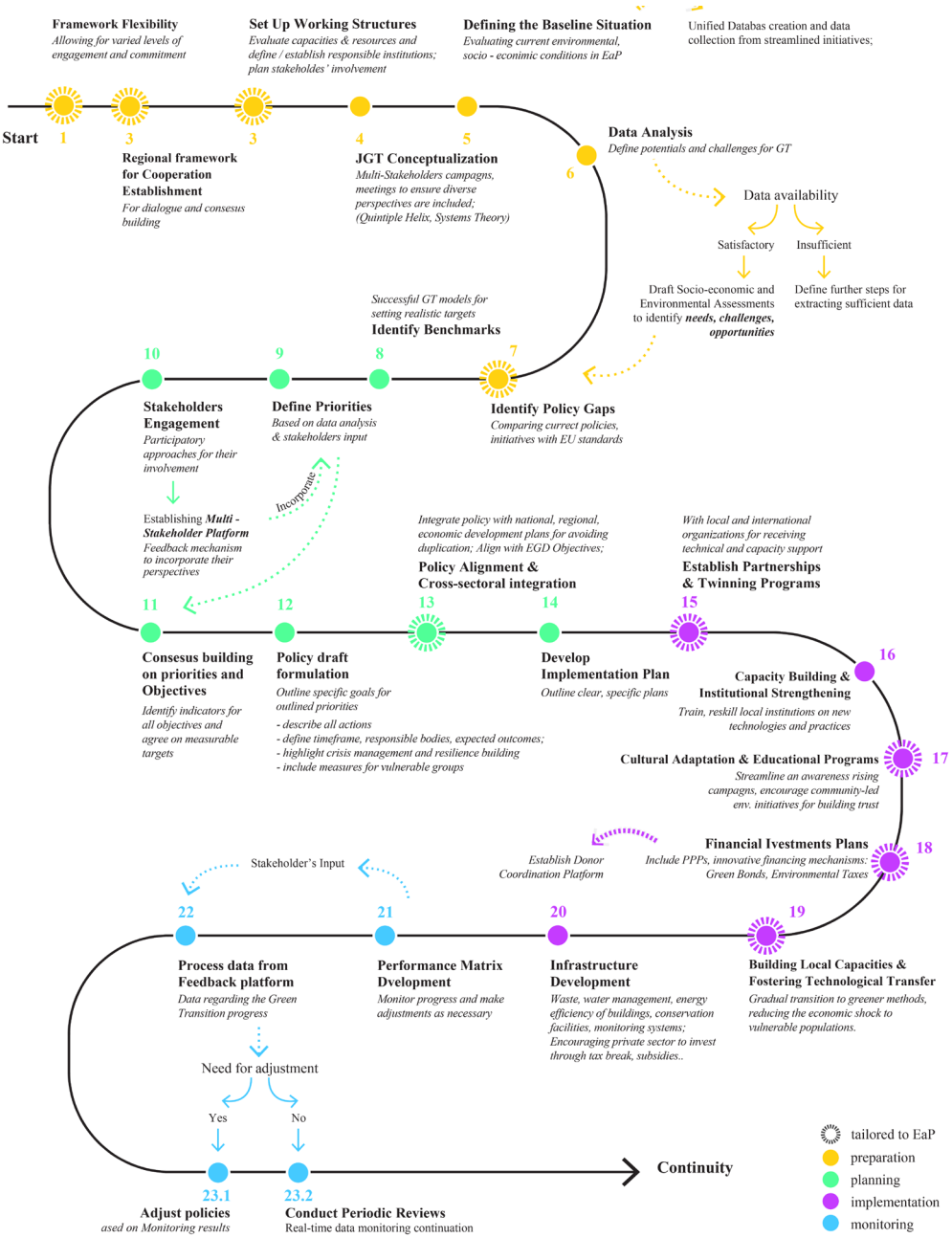


**Figure 4.** JGT Roadmap for the EaP
Source: author's own elaboration based on Katcharava (2024).

with enough flexibility, to reflect the mixed political aspirations (Berisha et al., 2026). For instance, Azerbaijan, Belarus and Armenia might necessitate a more tailored approach that reflect the EU integration stances and puts emphasis on regional benefits. Reflecting on the previous analysis of fragmented governance, it's crucial to have a body or group in charge for the regional cooperation. The structure can benefit from the Balkan Regional Framework for Cooperation, which in EaP will serve for dialogue and consensus; It would be tasked with exchanging of best practices, addressing shared challenges, and strengthening mutual trust.

Afterward, attention shifts toward national levels, where, in the absence of dedicated climate institutions, establishing the green transition coordination groups becomes fundamental. This stage operationalizes place-based governance by embedding transition management within domestic administrative systems.

The subsequent step involves contextualizing the green transition process – a 'redevelopment model based on locally designed public policies' (Mustață & Shevchuk, 2021). Here local expertise is irreplaceable; therefore, it is essential to engage stakeholders with local expertise who can integrate diverse perspectives.

The subsequent stage involves establishing a baseline assessment, including an evaluation of existing environmental and socio-economic conditions. The outcome of these assessments will aid to establish the basis for setting priorities, formulating policies, and monitoring progress. Consolidating these data enables a more precise identification of region-specific challenges and opportunities, securing that following measures are evidence-based and targeted. In parallel, EaP can draw on data through other sectoral initiatives (EU4Environment, EU4Energy, EU4Climate) which can be integrated in unified for identifying tendencies, evaluating policies and new strategies. This way EaP can shape a data-driven foundation for approaching path.

Succeeding phases include the data analysis and evaluation of potentials and challenges. This entails evaluating the availability and scope of existing data, conducted in parallel with the main process. Reliant on the data adequacy, this stage may call for an additional information assembly or, if suitable, continuing with socio-economic and environmental assessments.

The final step involves identifying policy gaps, whereby the EaP compares existing frameworks against EU standards; Including the regulatory framework comparison, enforcement mechanisms, and sector-specific policies (waste, energy, transportation). Identifying such gaps can reveal areas requiring reform and clarify obstacles to alignment with EU directives. This bridges the preparation and planning phases, and lays the foundation for developing better formulated green transition strategies that aligns EaP policies with EU standards.

## Planning

The planning phase begins with the identification of successful green transition models to establish achievable and measurable targets and standards that guide progress evaluation, whereas successful models inform better strategies. This dual tactic guarantees that targets are relevant, feasible and adapted to local contexts.

The subsequent step entails defining context-specific priority areas, drawing on prior data analysis and stakeholder input. This process is inherently participatory and at the same time, strengthens stakeholder engagement. The latter stage employs bottom-up approaches, which integrates the perspectives of vulnerable communities, employers, citizens, and governments. The iterative character of this process enables the continuous inclusion of local knowledge, thereby departs from conventional top-down models.

Once stakeholder perspectives are incorporated into the formulation of priority areas, consensus-building becomes necessary to harmonize understanding on core directions. This provides the basis for policy drafting and secures that objectives correspond to the identified priorities. Policy design should specify responsible institutions, establish clear timelines, define anticipated outcomes, and include targeted measures to support vulnerable groups. Next, considering that in EaP policies are often positioned as siloes, it becomes fundamental to integrate green transition policies with national, regional and economic development plans, for avoiding possible duplications. The latter operationalizes *policy coherence*, a key principle of multi-level governance, and involves of alignment of existing policies for identifying gaps, overlaps, and potential rooms for collaboration. This sets the stage for the concluding step of the planning phase – development of the implementation plan - which should define tasks, assign responsible actors, set deadlines, and allocate resources required for the green transition objectives.

## Implementation

Once the policy draft is confirmed, the project shifts to the implementation stage. Here attention moves on establishing partnerships and twinning programs with local and international actors to secure technical and capacity support. These mechanisms function as transition niches, mimicking the learning-by-doing tactic, and ensure that countries have essential tools and resources for executing their initiatives. In parallel, the redevelopment model should be launched, where capacity-building programs are essential instruments to equip local institutions with new operational competencies.

Alongside, it is necessary to introduce financial investment instruments, including Public Private Partnerships and innovative funding mechanisms (green bonds and environmental taxes), as evidenced from the WB experience. Drawing on the GAWB governance model, a structure comparable to the Donor Coordination Platform could be established. Such a mechanism would align funding streams with priorities and would help with transparent resource allocation, which is particularly relevant in the EaP context given increased corruption risks. Such a platform could function as a central coordination hub for pooling resources from international donors, prevent duplication across similar projects, and secure that each initiative receives adequate financial backing.

Afterwards, it is important to build local capacities and facilitate technological transfer. The framework should address disparities (especially in industrial development) and focus on building local capacities with specific needs for each country to reduce the economic shock to vulnerable people.

Given the legacy of past transitions and existing cultural barriers, the green transition framework should prioritize policies formulated through inclusive and participatory processes to reinforce societal acceptance. The framework 'should promote co-ownership initiative for gaining public trust and fostering a collective sense of ownership over environmental initiatives. Parallel to that, educational programs and awareness campaigns need to communicate the benefits of the green transition in a way that is accessible and engaging for all stakeholders, particularly in areas with low environmental awareness' (Katcharava, 2024, p. 133).

Despite the financial resources under the EGD, supplementary funding is required to support incoming projects. Therefore, mobilizing financial instruments becomes a priority to prevent disruptions. Once the funding stream is secured, resources can be redirected toward priority infrastructure development projects.

### Monitoring

Here priority should be given to establishing a performance matrix to monitor progress and initiate necessary adjustments. It reflects the iterative logic of the planning phase, whereby stakeholder feedback and matrix data jointly inform assessments. Feedback loop enables timely policy adjustments or prepares them for upcoming reviews based on inputs. The latter secures that policies stay relevant across varying contexts and adapt to emerging needs.

## Concluding Remarks, Limitations and Future Research Perspectives

The green transition, particularly in transitional countries, is a dynamic and multifaceted process that requires sustained research to deal with ongoing complexities, confront emerging challenges, and capitalize on new opportunities. Similarly, as highlighted throughout this paper, the EaP context requires a flexible and adaptable research approach that is capable to both – addressing current shifts in each country's aspirations and taking advantage of upcoming opportunities as a partnership of shared responsibilities.

First and foremost, future studies should consider the temporal dynamics of EaP countries, particularly their rapidly shifting socio-political contexts. These fluctuations require research methodologies capable of capturing changes in real time. For instance, longitudinal studies would provide the insights into long-term effects of the JGT policies, thereby enable policymakers to refine strategies in response to evolving contexts.

Moreover, recapping the recent national reports, policy fragmentation was collectively emphasized as a fundamental challenge across all EaP countries. It is, most commonly, manifesting through blurring the lines between targeting actions and resources to support specific issues. In this regard, future research should seek to focus deeper into policy integration and cross-sectoral coordination approaches. This includes examining governance models that enable synergetic policy-making across sectors and ensures that the EGD objectives are aligned with the national, regional and economic development plans.

Additionally, one of important challenges affecting the EaP is the inter-partnership split, which is likely to influence future decision-making and the effectiveness of JGT strategies. To address this, future studies should explore mechanisms for improving regional cooperation. This could include an exploration of successful models, such as the Regional Cooperation Council in WB. Research should examine how comparable frameworks can be tailored to the specific contexts of EaP countries to strengthen mutual trust and coordination. However, it necessitates an in-depth analysis of governance and institutional norms to ensure the viability of similar frameworks. This also necessitates an institutional culture analysis, as governance models are not transferable without accounting for administrative norms and power relations.

Nevertheless, the study encountered certain limitations during the research process, particularly regarding data availability. Interviews were conducted exclusively within the WB context, whereas conclusions concerning the EaP were largely derived from secondary sources, including policy documents and reports, which may not fully reflect ongoing dynamic processes. Moreover, heterogenous political orientation of EaP countries complicated the generalization of findings, which reflect a temporal context.

Last but not least, while the overall progress is being observed, the future trajectory of the JGT in the EaP will depend on closing the gap between commitments and implementation. Strengthening transparency, ensuring inclusive policymaking that incorporates civil society and local governance, will be fundamental to sustain long-term progress. The path forward must not only focus on regulatory alignment with the EU but also ensure that climate policies are adaptable to each country's socioeconomic and political realities. Integrated, cooperative, and well-resourced approach will be necessary to sustain meaningful progress in JGT, both within the EaP and in the broader EU context.

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