

SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS IN STARA ZAGORA

Positioning Stara
Zagora in Sustainability
Transition Policy



DUST

Democratising
jUst
Sustainability
Transitions

COLOFON

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PAPER PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This policy position paper presents the expectations, concerns, and aspirations of citizens in the Stara Zagora region, Bulgaria, regarding the future direction of the just transition away from fossil fuels. It contrasts the community perspectives with prevailing policy approaches and situates local voices within the broader landscape of national and EU transition measures.

As part of the Horizon Europe DUST project, the Regional Future Literacy Labs (RFLs) in Stara Zagora brought together citizens, policymakers, and local stakeholders to explore the main challenges and opportunities on the decarbonisation pathway. Communities, which were historically underrepresented in policymaking, including residents of smaller towns, villages, youth and other vulnerable groups, were actively involved through workshops, interviews, digital deliberation, and observation. Their contributions highlight how policies must address concrete local needs such as affordable public transport linking the cities of Radnevo and Galabovo with the whole region of Stara Zagora, reliable childcare services that allows families to stay in the region, and secure jobs that can replace coal industry employment.

This paper addresses three key audiences:

1. **Policymakers** at EU, national, regional, and local levels, who should ensure that transition strategies respond to the specific challenges, opportunities, and needs of communities in Stara Zagora.
2. **Civil society organisations and NGOs**, who should strengthen and amplify the voices of groups that are often least engaged in policymaking.
3. **Citizens of the region**, who should raise awareness of transition issues and encourage dialogue across different communities, particularly among those most affected by industrial restructuring.

LOCAL CONTEXT

Stara Zagora is Bulgaria's largest coal region, dominated by the Maritsa Iztok energy complex, which provides around 30% of the country's electricity. The sector directly employs about 20,000 people, while an additional 80,000–100,000 are indirectly employed through sub-contractors, services, and supply chains. The complex spans three municipalities: Radnevo, Galabovo, and Stara Zagora, making its future central to the socio-economic stability of the wider region.

The European Commission has approved Bulgaria's Territorial Just Transition Plan, allocating €1.2 billion for Stara Zagora, Pernik, and Kyustendil. In Stara Zagora, the funds include €60 million for energy-efficient building renovation, €36.5 million for training and retraining miners and power plant workers, and resources for the rehabilitation of more than 2,000 hectares of land for renewables and industrial zones.

Despite this support, the region faces serious challenges: air and soil pollution around Radnevo and Galabovo, dependence on a single industry, and social tensions. Worker protests in 2023 highlighted fears of job losses, underscoring the need for a fair, transparent, and inclusive transition that secures livelihoods while meeting climate goals.

In Stara Zagora, transition debates have often been led by national authorities, large energy companies, and municipal institutions, while the voices of smaller towns, villages, and local community groups remain underrepresented. Many residents feel distant from decision-making processes and lack accessible information about the Territorial Just Transition Plans. Limited

opportunities for participation in the policy-making process, combined with low trust in institutions and concerns that funding will not reach ordinary people, reduce their willingness to engage. These barriers risk side-lining valuable local knowledge and community experience that are essential for shaping a fair and effective transition.

The just transition in Stara Zagora region is more than an energy shift; it represents a profound social and economic transformation for the region. The gradual phase-out of coal and restructuring of related industries directly affect thousands of workers, their families, and the wider community. For these changes to be fair and effective, policies must be rooted in local realities and shaped with the active participation of citizens. Community-led approaches ensure that transition strategies respond not only to national and EU climate goals, but also to everyday concerns such as jobs, education, healthcare, and quality of life. Engaging citizens builds trust, strengthens resilience, and makes the transition more inclusive, especially for groups that are often left out of decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COMMUNITY IN STARA ZAGORA REGION

The Regional Future Literacy Labs, workshops, interviews, observation notes, and Pol.is deliberations provided a unique opportunity to hear directly from citizens of Stara Zagora about their expectations from the just transition. The discussions revealed a mixture of anxiety and pragmatism: people fear the decline of secure employment in coal-related sectors, the continuing emigration of young people, and unequal access to opportunities; on the other, they see the transition as a chance to modernize education, diversify the economy, and strengthen communities. Across all settings, participants emphasized that the transition must be fair and transparent, with visible proof that EU and national funds reach workers, families, and small businesses in the region rather than remain in the hands of large companies or national institutions.

These labs help citizens imagine and prepare for the future, increasing their capacity to adapt. They aim to:

1. **Raise awareness of local policy impacts**
2. **Build trust between citizens and institutions**
3. **Integrate local knowledge into policy**
4. **Provide a forum for expressing hopes and concerns**
5. **Promote proactive citizen involvement in policy co-creation**

Citizens underlined that current education and training systems are not aligned with the skills needed in new green and digital sectors, leaving young people unprepared and older workers unsure how to adapt. They warned against a transition that produces only temporary or precarious work and called instead for long-term, decent jobs with fair pay. Many also expressed a lack of trust in institutions, pointing to weak communication, low accountability, and fears that transition funds would not reach those who need them most. Beyond economic concerns, people raised issues of well-being: access to healthcare, childcare, elderly care, and cultural life were all seen as fundamental parts of what makes a community viable during change.

Citizens did not approach these questions separately. Instead, they consistently linked education, employment, and fairness as three inseparable pillars of a successful transition. Education reform and reskilling are seen as prerequisites for preparing people to take up new opportunities; economic diversification and business support are required to actually create those opportunities; and social justice, transparency, and services are essential to ensure that everyone can benefit.

From these inputs, three priority areas for strategic action emerge:

1. **Education and Skills** – reforming high school curricula, investing in teachers' specialisation, bridging the digital divide, and creating strong school-business partnerships so that people are prepared for the jobs and challenges of the future.
2. **Economic Diversification and Quality Employment** – fostering SMEs and entrepreneurship, attracting investment into new sectors, guaranteeing decent work, and ensuring reskilling programs lead to guaranteed jobs.
3. **Social Justice and Community Well-Being** – making fairness the guiding principle of the transition, ensuring transparency and citizen monitoring in the use of funds, investing in social services such as healthcare, childcare, and cultural life, and supporting community networks that strengthen solidarity and participation across the region.

Together, these three areas reflect what citizens most want for the just transition: to be equipped with the proper knowledge and skills, to be given equal career opportunities, and to be treated fairly in the process. The following subsections translate these voices into concrete recommendations for policymakers at local, regional, and national level.

MAKE EDUCATION A CORNERSTONE OF A JUST TRANSITION. STRENGTHEN ALIGNMENT WITH THE LABOUR MARKET, CRITICAL THINKING, AND DIGITAL LITERACY.

Participants in Stara Zagora consistently described education as both a justice issue and a foundation for resilience in the transition. Many stressed that schools and training institutions do not adequately prepare young people or workers for the changing regional economy. Citizens and community representatives noted the big mismatch between what is taught and the skills needed in renewable energy sectors, digital industries, and modern services.

While there is recognition of strong traditions in Bulgarian education, participants highlighted deficits in practical training, adaptability, and creativity, especially in preparing workers for retraining and young people for future professions. They called for reforms that embed critical thinking, problem-solving, and media literacy, especially in an era where misinformation is seen as a growing threat. Digitalization of education was widely supported, but citizens cautioned that digital gaps remain, especially in rural communities.

Community activists pointed out the role of local cultural centres in towns and villages as informal hubs for increasing digital literacy, retraining, and civic education, thus often compensating for the lack of well-resourced schools in rural areas. This underlines the need for a multi-layered education system that spans formal institutions, community networks, and workplaces.

To achieve equity and future readiness in Stara Zagora, participants argued for investment in teacher training, digital tools, and stronger school-business partnerships. They see education as not only preparing individuals for future employment in a changing economy but also equipping communities to participate in the transition planning and hold institutions accountable.

The quotes below were shared by Stara Zagora's RFL participants.



"The school should be so diverse that it offers children a variety of topics... until they find their thing. Their talent."

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Make vocational education a priority in coal-affected municipalities

Relevant for the Ministry of Education, Regional Education Directorate, Municipalities of Radnevo and Galabovo, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy: upgrade and expand vocational schools in Radnevo and Galabovo to retrain mine and plant workers for jobs in renewables, construction, logistics, and maintenance. These municipalities face the sharpest employment loss and need targeted programs.

Integrate critical thinking and digital competence in regional curricula

Relevant for the Ministry of Education, Regional Education Directorate, schools, and teacher training institutes : all schools in the Stara Zagora region should balance labour market skills with creativity and adaptability. Pilot programs can test new teaching methods in Stara Zagora city schools and then scale across smaller towns.

“At the top of the list, I place schools and universities that should offer adequate education and specializations relevant to the times.”

Strengthen early career guidance across the region

Relevant for the Ministry of Education, Regional Education Directorate, schools, and municipalities: introduce structured career orientation in grades 5–7 in every municipality, not only in major urban centres. Early guidance should broaden students’ horizons, prevent narrow specialization too early, and help reduce youth outmigration from the region.

Invest in teachers and trainers

Relevant for the Ministry of Education, teacher training institutes, and municipalities: better pay, training opportunities, and support are needed to keep teachers in the region. Strengthen STEM, digital, and environmental competences.

Support local cultural centres as adult training hubs

Relevant for the Ministry of Culture, municipalities (esp. rural), and NGOs: provide funding for cultural centres in villages across the South-East region to run evening IT, language, and digital skills classes. This helps rural residents and older workers who cannot access formal education in the city.

Close the digital divide in villages

Relevant for the Ministry of e-Government, telecom providers, municipalities, and the Regional Education Directorate: prioritize high-speed internet rollout in rural, where poor connectivity limits access to online education. Ensure affordable devices and training for students and elderly residents.

BUILD A DIVERSE REGIONAL ECONOMY WITH STABLE AND DECENT JOBS

For citizens of Stara Zagora, employment is the most urgent issue in the just transition. People worry that once coal is phased out, the region will lose its economic backbone, and young people will be forced to leave for better living conditions and job opportunities. Participants in the RFLI workshops, interviews, and PoLis discussions repeatedly stressed that jobs must come first – but not just any jobs. They asked for secure, fairly paid employment opportunities in Radnevo, Galabovo, and across the region, giving young people reasons to stay instead of migrating to Sofia or abroad.

Citizens are open to new economic directions but stressed that investments must deliver benefits for local people, not only external investors. There is a strong call to support SMEs and entrepreneurship, building on the region's tradition of industrial skills and business initiative. New opportunities are seen in the sectors of renewable energy, IT and digital services, sustainable agriculture, circular economy industries (repair, reuse, recycling), and eco-tourism.

At the same time, people warned against precarious jobs such as short-term, low-paid work that does not provide stability. They asked for long-term employer commitments, job security, and dignified working conditions. Community members raised concerns that women, members of the Roma communities, and older workers are often excluded from quality opportunities, and insisted on policies that guarantee equal access.

Citizens also underlined that public investment should anchor diversification. Municipalities and the state should invest in green infrastructure, support cooperatives and family businesses, and adapt procurement rules so that schools, hospitals, and social institutions cooperate with local producers and service providers. In this way, the transition would directly benefit local communities, rather than being dominated by external companies.

Finally, participants stressed that reskilling must be directly linked to real vacancies, while companies benefiting from public support should be obliged to hire a share of the transitioning workers. This would build trust that retraining translates into real careers in the new economy.

The quotes below were shared by Stara Zagora's RFLI participants.

"New specializations that "produce" specialists meeting contemporary demands... I'm not just talking about IT [...] but creating specific programs linked to the development of various areas... medicine, science, technology..."

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION AND QUALITY EMPLOYMENT

Anchor diversification in regional investment

Relevant for the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Innovation and Growth, South-East Regional Development Council, and municipalities: prioritize public funding for concrete projects in renewables (solar parks on reclaimed mining land near Radnevo and Galabovo), ICT hubs in Stara Zagora city, sustainable agriculture in rural municipalities, and eco-tourism in the Sredna Gora foothills. Funding should be tied to job creation for local residents.

Guarantee quality employment, not just numbers

Relevant for the Labour Inspectorate, trade unions, Just Transition Fund authorities, and employers' associations: set binding criteria for new employers in industrial zones (e.g. Zagore Industrial Park) requiring contracts with fair wages, safe conditions, and minimum three-year commitments. Establish monitoring mechanisms through the Labour Inspectorate and trade unions to prevent precarious work arrangements.

Link reskilling to real job opportunities

Relevant for the Ministry of Education & Science, Regional Labour Offices, National Employment Agency, and local employers: design training modules for miners and plant workers that correspond directly to vacancies in renewable

energy, construction, logistics, and IT. Companies that benefit from EU or state support must sign agreements to employ a quota of program graduates.

Support SMEs and entrepreneurship as engines of change

Relevant for the Ministry of Economy & Industry, municipalities, regional business associations, and the Bulgarian Development Bank: earmark a share of Just Transition Fund resources specifically for SMEs and cooperatives in the region. Provide technical assistance, low-interest loans, and guidance on how to apply for these resources. Establish local advisory desks to help small businesses navigate funding procedures, prepare applications, and develop diversification plans in services, logistics, and green construction. Extend grant schemes region-wide to support family businesses and rural entrepreneurs in agriculture, crafts, and tourism.

Use public procurement to strengthen the local economy

Relevant for municipalities, Public Procurement Agency, and Ministry of Finance: amend municipal procurement rules so that schools, hospitals, and social institutions in the region can contract local SMEs for catering, maintenance, energy renovation, and IT services. This keeps value and employment in the region instead of outsourcing to external providers.

Promote inclusive access to new opportunities

Relevant for the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Regional Employment Services, NGOs, and municipalities: develop tailored support measures for women, Roma communities, and older workers in Radnevo and Galabovo, where labour market exclusion is strongest. Region-wide, expand childcare and flexible working arrangements so more women can take part in new economic activities.

ENSURE FAIRNESS, INCLUSION, AND TRUST IN THE TRANSITION

For many citizens in Stara Zagora, the just transition is not only about jobs and training but also about fairness and dignity. In RFLI workshops and interviews, participants repeatedly voiced concerns that vulnerable groups (youth, women, members of the Roma communities, older workers, and people in rural areas) are often excluded from opportunities while carrying the heaviest burdens of change. Without targeted measures, they fear the transition will deepen existing inequalities instead of reducing them.

A recurring issue was trust in institutions. Citizens pointed to the lack of transparency in how transition funds and programs are managed and demanded clear communication, public monitoring, and visible proof that community input shapes real decisions. Many stressed that unless authorities show how people's voices are taken into account, confidence in the process will remain low.

Participants also underlined the urgent need for stronger social services across the region. Access to healthcare, childcare, eldercare, and cultural spaces is uneven. Healthcare, in particular, emerged as a pressing demand, with calls for mobile health units and community health hubs to guarantee access in both towns and villages. Yet this dimension is absent from the Territorial Just Transition Plan and other official frameworks, revealing a clear gap between policy and people's priorities. Citizens emphasized that investment in schools, nurseries, health services, and cultural life is just as critical as industrial projects. Without it, many families, especially in smaller municipalities, cannot take advantage of new opportunities.

At the community level, citizens stressed the role of solidarity networks and cultural institutions, such as local cultural centres, NGOs, and associations, as trusted spaces for learning, participation, and mutual aid. They argued that these networks must be strengthened and funded as essential partners in the transition.

Participants insisted that social justice must guide every measure of the transition. This means not only compensating those most affected by the coal phase-out but also ensuring that historically underrepresented groups gain real opportunities to thrive in a changing economy.

The quotes below were shared by Stara Zagora's RFLI participants.

"Adequate opportunities for sports and recreation in the region."

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Make social justice a core principle of the transition

Relevant for the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Labour & Social Policy, and South-East Regional Development Council: ensure that every transition measure, whether in education, reskilling, or infrastructure, includes a requirement to reduce inequalities. In practice, this means prioritizing investments in coal-dependent municipalities such as Radnevo and Galabovo, as well as rural villages where access to services and jobs is weakest. Social impact assessments should be added to all transition-funded projects.

Guarantee transparency and citizen monitoring

Relevant for municipalities, Just Transition Fund managing authority, NGOs, and civic councils: publish quarterly reports at municipal level detailing how Just Transition funds are allocated and spent, broken down by project and beneficiary. Establish citizen monitoring councils in Stara Zagora, Radnevo, and Galabovo that include trade unions, NGOs, and community representatives, to review spending and outcomes.

Strengthen local social services and infrastructure

Relevant for municipalities, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Labour & Social Policy: allocate funding for mobile healthcare units serving villages in Stara Zagora, Radnevo, and Galabovo; expand childcare capacity to reduce waiting lists in Stara Zagora city; open new eldercare services in Galabovo where the population is aging fastest. Cultural facilities should be renovated in smaller towns to provide accessible community hubs.

Support community networks and cultural centres

Relevant for municipalities, Ministry of Culture, donor programs, and regional NGOs: introduce multiannual funding programs for cultural centres, NGOs, and local associations in both urban neighbourhoods and rural villages, so they can deliver IT training, civic education, and social activities. Provide municipalities with funds to strengthen these networks as recognized partners in the transition.

Prioritize vulnerable groups in new opportunities

Relevant for Regional Labour Offices, Ministry of Labour & Social Policy, municipalities, and NGOs: develop tailored employment and entrepreneurship programs for women re-entering the workforce, Roma communities in rural settlements, older workers affected by mine closures, and youth at risk of outmigration. Provide subsidies for employers hiring from these groups and ensure retraining courses are accessible outside Stara Zagora city.

"A common strategy, shared goals, a plan, and ideas... Strategies that create a bridge between society and the affected workers."

COMMUNITY AND POLICY FUTURES: VISUALISING DIVERGENT PATHWAYS

Imagined probable futures

The probable future reflects what people expect if current trends continue and the transition is not guided by strong, inclusive policies. Citizens anticipate accelerated depopulation, with young people searching for better opportunities in other regions:

"If nothing changes, our children will leave, and we will be left with empty schools and closed businesses."



They expect precarious jobs and low wages to replace secure coal employment, particularly if foreign investors dominate while local businesses are overlooked. A common concern expressed in the deliberations was:

"Local government should prioritize local businesses over incentivizing foreign investors."

Environmental and health pressures are also part of this outlook, with doubts that coal-related pollution will be adequately addressed.

Governance is seen as fragile, with a widespread feeling that institutions may fail to deliver:

"Decisions are made far from us, and people don't see where the money goes."



Together, these views depict a future of stagnation, loss of people, limited opportunities, and declining trust in institutions.

Imagined preferred futures

The preferred future, in contrast, shows the aspirations of the community for a fair and forward-looking transition. Citizens envision a diversified green economy, combining renewable energy, IT, sustainable agriculture, and eco-tourism. As one seed statement captured,

"The Stara Zagora region should establish itself as a digital hub for high-tech companies."



In this preferred vision, Stara Zagora is not defined by its past but by its capacity to innovate, keep its young people, and build trust through community-led participation. Citizens want to see a future where decisions are taken transparently, public services are accessible, and community networks (local cultural centres, NGOs, civic groups) play a central role in sustaining resilience and solidarity.

Many also stressed the importance of aligning education with labour market needs:

"Vocational education should be a priority to meet the future labour market needs."

People want schools to equip students not only with technical skills but also unlock creativity and stimulate critical thinking, supported by strong links between education, business, and local government. They also emphasized community well-being as a pillar of the transition:

"It is not only jobs; we need conditions to live well here."



Policy futures

One outcome of the first stages of the labs was a mapping of sustainability transition policy measures relevant to Stara Zagora. These include national Just Transition Fund (JTF) programming, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Bulgaria's National Energy and Climate Plan, the Regional Development Strategy for the South-East Planning Region, municipal development programs, and the regional Smart Specialization Strategy. The full list is presented in the Annex.

Compared to the community's preferred future, the policy framework shows a more technocratic and industry-oriented perspective. National and regional documents emphasize large-scale investment and infrastructure priorities but pay less attention to everyday needs such as quality education, access to healthcare, or community services. In the labs, participants often observed that while strategies are labelled "people-oriented," the practical focus is on industry restructuring, decarbonization, and technical modernization.

From the analysis of policy documents, several key focus areas stand out:

- 1. Decarbonization of industry:** Policies prioritize phasing out coal and modernizing energy-intensive industries, with large-scale investments in renewable energy and hydrogen projects.
- 2. Reskilling and labour market adaptation:** Programs are designed to prepare workers for future jobs in energy and digital sectors, but citizens question whether these pathways will lead to secure local employment. The TJTP allocates €36.5 million for training and

retraining, yet citizens in the RFLs repeatedly questioned whether such programs would lead to secure, long-term local jobs.

- 3. Technology-driven solutions:** Strategic documents highlight innovation, digitalization, and automation as drivers of the transition, but there is less emphasis on social equity and service provision.
- 4. Infrastructure modernization:** Major funding is allocated to transport, digital connectivity, and industrial zones, with limited attention to how these investments translate into benefits for communities and families.

While these measures are essential for meeting national and EU climate goals, their immediate impact on citizens' day-to-day lives like upgrading schools, improving healthcare access in villages, or ensuring transparent use of transition funds remains limited. This contrast highlights the gap between what communities describe as their preferred futures and the directions taken by existing policy frameworks.

From the analysis of policies, several key aspects of concern and opportunity were identified, which were emphasized in policy documents alongside those expressed by the community during the RFLs and related engagement activities.

Natural capital

Policy perspective	
Renewable energy zones	Decarbonization targets
Air & water quality plans	Land restoration measures

This comparison is presented in the tables below and illustrates how policy frameworks and local voices engage differently with the region’s core assets and challenges.

Community perspective	
Clean air & water	Reclamation and re-use of former mining areas
Biodiversity protection	Sustainable farming

Economic capital

Policy perspective	
Foreign investment attraction	Smart Specialization (ICT, mechatronics, energy)
Industrial parks & energy hubs	Large-scale industry transition

Community perspective	
SME & entrepreneurship support	Diversified economy (tourism, renewables, IT, agriculture)
Local government should prioritize local businesses	Support for cooperatives and social enterprises

Built environment capital

Policy perspective	
Housing programs	Urban development plans
Municipal regeneration projects	Industrial zones & logistics hubs

Community perspective	
Affordable housing	Youth & cultural spaces
Balanced urban–rural investment	Green public areas

Human capital

Policy perspective		Community perspective	
Reskilling & upskilling programs	STEM & digital education	Population retention	Better schools & teachers
Labour mobility focus	Training for green jobs	Creativity & critical thinking	Secure jobs for young people

Infrastructure capital

Policy perspective		Community perspective	
Broadband expansion	Digitalization projects	Reliable public transport	Mobile healthcare units
Transport corridors (road & rail)	Hydrogen & renewable infrastructure	Digital inclusion for villages & elderly	Community health hubs

X-capital

Policy perspective		Community perspective	
EU Green Deal alignment	Technological innovation	Transparency & trust	Citizen participation
Carbon neutrality goals	Smart Specialization priorities	Local cultural centres & NGOs as anchors	Fairness & solidarity



DRAFTING THE STATEMENTS FROM WORKSHOP FINDINGS

The comparison between community voices and policy frameworks revealed both overlaps and important gaps. On the one hand, the JTF Territorial Just Transition Plan, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, and the South-East Regional Development Strategy emphasize industrial decarbonization, technological modernization, and large-scale infrastructure projects. On the other, citizens in Stara Zagora consistently highlighted fairness, secure and decent employment, high-quality education, and access to strong social services as the true foundations of a just transition.

To make these contrasts tangible, insights from the RFLs, interviews, Pol.is deliberation, and observation notes were translated into a set of concise statements. These statements captured areas of alignment with policy directions, as well as community priorities that are not adequately addressed. They were then used as a basis for wider public debate.

Some of the statements reflected clear divergences between local voices and policy framing, for example:

- "Local government should prioritize local businesses over incentivizing foreign investors."
- "Healthcare access must be treated as part of transition infrastructure, with mobile units for rural areas."

Other statements highlighted shared themes with different emphases, such as:

- "Vocational education should be a priority to meet labour market needs."
- "Reskilling programs must be linked directly to employer commitments."

Finally, several statements emerged directly from community concerns, not covered in existing policies:

- "Decisions about the transition must be transparent, with clear proof of how public money is used."
- "Local cultural centres should be supported as hubs for education, solidarity, and civic life."

By drafting and debating these statements, the process created a bridge between expert-driven strategies and lived realities. It allowed citizens not only to respond to existing policies, but to articulate their own priorities and shape the language of transition, ensuring that the region's future is built on both technical solutions and community-defined needs.

GAUGING THE REGIONAL PUBLIC OPINION

Five fast facts about the Pol.is deliberation in Stara Zagora

1. **Total participants:** 92 participants joined the online process.
2. **Original statements:** 73 original statements were prepared from RFLL workshops, interviews, and policy mapping.
3. **Added statements:** 36 new statements were added by participants during the deliberation.
4. **Total statements evaluated:** 109 statements in total were evaluated.
5. **Total votes cast:** 5214 votes were cast across all statements, showing strong community engagement.

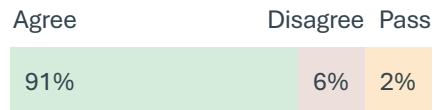
In the final stage of the RFLLs, community-generated statements were submitted for public deliberation via the Pol.is platform in the Stara Zagora region. The goal was to broaden participation and test how citizens across the region engage with the issues identified during workshops, interviews, and policy mapping.

The deliberation revealed for which topics there is broad consensus, where opinions diverge, and which attracted the most engagement. Many statements on education, fair employment, and community well-being drew strong agreement, while other areas such as the role of foreign investment or the speed of digitalization highlighted differences between opinion groups. Distinct clusters of participants formed around education priorities, economic models, and environmental measures.

Some statements drew particularly strong support, including calls for encouraging critical thinking in schools, clean environment and green spaces, cooperation between employers and education, and better public transport. Others generated debate, such as whether digital technologies in schools should be introduced early or more gradually, or how to balance local and foreign investment. Not every issue resonated equally - some proposals received limited interaction, suggesting that awareness or urgency differs across themes.

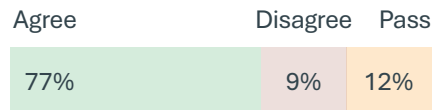
Consensus statements

Education should not be subordinated only to the needs of the market, but should also develop critical thinking, flexibility, and life skills.



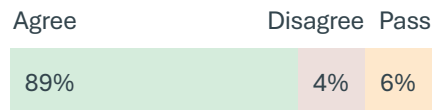
Preferred Future? YES
Policy Future? NO

Education should be more closely connected to the needs of the labour market.



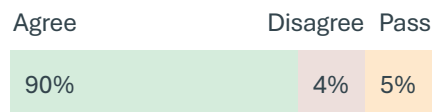
Preferred Future? YES
Policy Future? YES

Both employers and local authorities should invest jointly in vocational education.



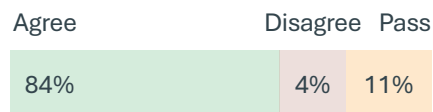
Preferred Future? YES
Policy Future? YES

Focus on clean food, clean water, clean air for all residents of the settlement in the region.



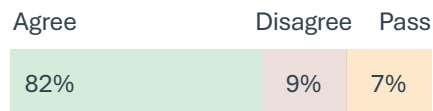
Preferred Future? YES
Policy Future? N/A

Green areas should remain primarily for rest and recreation.



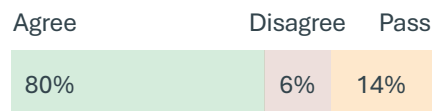
Preferred Future? YES
Policy Future? NO

Public transport in the region must be more efficient, environmentally friendly, and modern.



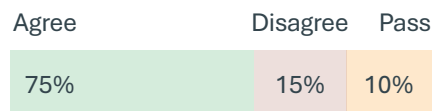
Preferred Future? YES
Policy Future? YES

Industry should be decentralized and economic activity created in all settlements in the region.



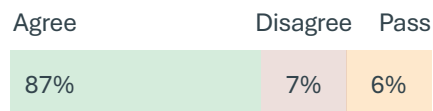
Preferred Future? YES
Policy Future? YES

Local authorities should support local businesses instead of encouraging foreign investors.



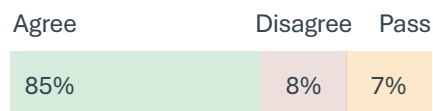
Preferred Future? YES
Policy Future? NO

Technologies are useful only when used correctly, and teachers must be well-prepared.



Preferred Future? YES
Policy Future? N/A

Investment should be made in energy-efficient public transport that is accessible to everyone.



Preferred Future? YES
Policy Future? YES



WHAT'S NEXT?

The coming years will be decisive for translating the vision of a fair and sustainable transition in Stara Zagora into tangible outcomes. Immediate priorities must focus on the operationalisation of Just Transition funds in ways that are transparent, inclusive, and accountable. This requires not only clear eligibility rules and monitoring mechanisms, but also citizen involvement in decision-making at municipal and regional levels. Dedicated structures for public oversight—such as citizen monitoring councils—can provide proof that resources are reaching workers, families, and local businesses rather than being captured by national institutions or large external actors. Such mechanisms will also help restore trust in institutions and demonstrate that the transition responds to the needs of the people most affected by it.

In parallel, education and reskilling must move from pilot initiatives to region-wide programmes. Reform of vocational schools in Radnevo and Galabovo, combined with digital literacy initiatives in rural areas, will be essential to prevent outmigration of youth and ensure older workers can adapt. To guarantee meaningful outcomes, training must be directly tied to employment contracts in emerging sectors such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and IT services. Policymakers should also support cultural centres and community organisations as partners in education and adult learning, recognising their role in reaching vulnerable groups.

A second priority is to anchor economic diversification in locally beneficial investment. While large-scale renewable and hydrogen projects will shape the energy future of the region, these must be complemented by targeted support for SMEs, cooperatives, and family businesses that sustain livelihoods across towns and villages. Public procurement rules should be adapted so that schools, hospitals, and social institutions source goods and services locally, ensuring that EU funds multiply benefits for the regional economy. At the same time, criteria for new investors must include commitments to provide secure, well-paid jobs for local residents, preventing a slide into precarious or short-term employment.

The transition in Stara Zagora will succeed only if social justice and community well-being are treated as core pillars, not side issues. This means embedding social impact assessments into all projects, investing in healthcare, childcare, eldercare, and cultural facilities alongside industrial zones and transport corridors. Stronger municipal capacity will be needed to plan, coordinate, and deliver these services, with support from national authorities and EU partners. By pursuing a balanced agenda that combines decarbonisation with fairness, Stara Zagora can position itself as a model for how coal regions in Southeast Europe can transition without leaving communities behind.

REGIONAL FUTURE LITERACY LABS: STEP BY STEP PROCESS

The Regional Futures Literacy Labs (RFLs) were conducted in the four case study regions of Stara Zagora (Bulgaria), Norrbotten (Sweden), Lusatia (Germany) and Katowice (Poland). In each region, a distinct transition community was involved. The labs followed an eight-stage structure, using both in-person workshops and the digital engagement tool *Pol.is*.

- 1. Preparatory step:** The potential impacts of sustainability transition measures at EU, national, and regional level were mapped, including Bulgaria's Just Transition Fund Territorial Plan, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, the National Energy and Climate Plan, the South-East Regional Development Strategy, and relevant municipal programs.
- 2. First and second workshop:** In Stara Zagora, the two RFL workshops were merged into a single meeting. The session began with community members and policymakers together, introducing the DUST project and discussing regional assets and key themes such as employment, environment, digitalization, and education. In the second part, citizens worked separately to reflect on regional challenges and outline their visions for the future.
- 3. Futures analysis:** These conversations were then synthesized and visualized, distinguishing between the futures people expect if current trends continue —probable futures— and the futures they would like to achieve —preferred futures.
- 4. Policy comparison:** These community visions were then compared with the directions outlined in national and regional transition policies —policy futures— to highlight where citizens' priorities align with or diverge from existing plans.
- 5. Third workshop:** Building on this comparison, participants worked together to transform their positions into clear policy statements.
- 6. Public deliberation:** The statements were tested through the online platform *Pol.is*, where a wider group of citizens could vote and comment, allowing consensus and divides to emerge.
- 7. Fourth workshop:** In the final step, the community consolidated the results into a set of practical recommendations addressed to policymakers at local, regional and national levels.



SETTING THE SCENE

Why are community-led sustainability transitions important?

Sustainability transitions involve deep socio-economic changes that impact communities in diverse and unequal ways across Europe. These transitions can bring both opportunities and challenges, especially in regions with slower economic growth. For transitions to be fair and effective, they must be designed through place-based, community-led policymaking that empowers citizens, increases awareness, and builds resilience. Active citizen involvement ensures policies are accountable, inclusive, and tailored to local needs—especially those of underrepresented groups.

What is the current status of sustainability transition in Stara Zagora?

Stara Zagora is Bulgaria's largest coal region, dominated by the Maritsa Iztok energy complex, which provides around 30% of the country's electricity. The sector directly employs about 20,000 people, while an additional 80,000–100,000 are indirectly employed through sub-contractors, services, and supply chains. The complex spans three municipalities: Radnevo, Galabovo, and Stara Zagora, making its future central to the socio-economic stability of the wider region.

The European Commission has approved Bulgaria's Territorial Just Transition Plan, allocating €1.2 billion for Stara Zagora, Pernik, and Kyustendil. In Stara Zagora, the funds include €60

million for energy-efficient building renovation, €36.5 million for training and retraining miners and power plant workers, and resources for the rehabilitation of more than 2,000 hectares of land for renewables and industrial zones.

Despite this support, the region faces serious challenges: air and soil pollution around Radnevo and Galabovo, dependence on a single industry, and social tensions. Worker protests in 2023 highlighted fears of job losses, underscoring the need for a fair, transparent, and inclusive transition that secures livelihoods while meeting climate goals.

Why is the local community less engaged in Stara Zagora's transition?

In Stara Zagora, transition debates have often been led by national authorities, large energy companies, and municipal institutions, while the voices of smaller towns, villages, and local community groups remain underrepresented. Many residents feel distant from decision-making processes and lack accessible information about the Territorial Just Transition Plans. Limited opportunities for participation in the policy-making process, combined with low trust in institutions and concerns that funding will not reach ordinary people, reduce their willingness to engage. These barriers risk side-lining valuable local knowledge and community experience that are essential for shaping a fair and effective transition.

The just transition in Stara Zagora region is more than an energy shift; it represents a profound

social and economic transformation for the region. The gradual phase-out of coal and restructuring of related industries directly affect thousands of workers, their families, and the wider community. For these changes to be fair and effective, policies must be rooted in local realities and shaped with the active participation of citizens. Community-led approaches ensure that transition strategies respond not only to national and EU climate goals, but also to everyday concerns such as jobs, education, healthcare, and quality of life. Engaging citizens builds trust, strengthens resilience, and makes the transition more inclusive, especially for groups that are often left out of decision-making.

HORIZON EUROPE'S DUST PROJECT & THE REGIONAL FUTURE LITERACY LABS

The DUST project, funded by Horizon Europe, aims to democratise territorial responses to sustainability transitions by increasing citizen participation and trust. Through **Regional Future Literacy Labs**, the project fosters inclusive, place-based dialogue between citizens and policymakers in transition-vulnerable regions.

These labs help citizens imagine and prepare for the future, increasing their capacity to adapt. They aim to:



The labs follow an eight-stage structure, using both in-person workshops and the digital engagement tool *Pol.is*.



ANNEX

Complete list of analysed strategic documents

- » Territorial Just Transition Plan – Stara Zagora Region.
- » National Recovery and Resilience Plan of Bulgaria.
- » National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) 2021–2030.
- » Integrated Territorial Development Strategy of the South-East Region 2021–2027.
- » Integrated Development Plan of Municipality of Stara Zagora 2021–2027.
- » Integrated Development Plans of Galabovo and Radnevo Municipalities 2021–2027.
- » Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization 2021–2027 – Bulgaria.

Complete list of seed statements

Education and skills

- » Education must be more closely linked to the needs of the labor market.
- » Education should not be solely subordinate to market needs, but should develop critical thinking, flexibility, and life skills.
- » Both employers and local authorities should jointly invest in vocational education.
- » It is the labor market, not the local government, that should have the leading role and responsibility in training personnel.
- » Early career guidance limits the development of interests.
- » Career guidance should start from middle school (grades 5–7).
- » Schools should prioritize the development of STEM fields – science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Digitalization and technology

- » Digital technologies can make learning more accessible and engaging.
- » Excessive digitalization can harm critical thinking and social skills.
- » Digitalization should be integrated at all levels of education, complementing traditional methods.
- » Digital technologies should be introduced into the educational process only after a certain age and provided that teachers are prepared to use them effectively.
- » The Stara Zagora region should establish itself as a digital hub with favorable conditions for innovative companies.
- » Internet infrastructure is at a good level and is not a priority for further development in the region.
- » High-speed internet in the region is key to digitalization and the future of young people.
- » The region has reliable internet, which limits the need for additional investments in this area.
- » Insufficient internet connectivity in the region hinders digital progress and limits opportunities for youth development.

Transport and infrastructure

- » Public transport in the region should be more efficient, eco-friendly, and modern.
- » Improving road infrastructure should be an urgent priority.
- » The development of transport infrastructure should encourage active mobility (cycling, walking) instead of the use of private cars.
- » The purchase of low-emission private vehicles should be encouraged through grants/reduced fees and improved infrastructure (charging

stations, parking spaces, etc.).

- » Car-restricted zones in the city should be expanded
- » Restricting car access to certain parts of the city hinders local businesses and citizens' mobility.

Environment and community spaces

- » Green spaces should remain primarily for recreation and leisure.
- » Parks should offer more sports facilities and bicycle lanes.

Economy and industry

- » The development of traditional industries in the Stara Zagora region should not be neglected.

Complete list of Pol.is comments

- » Teachers – and later students – should be trained as a priority in the use of digital technologies, particularly artificial intelligence.
- » People of all ages, ethnicities, and social groups should be included in projects related to the city's development.
- » A regional circular economy should be created to meet all the basic needs of the population related to physical survival and human development
- » Introduce educational activities that strengthen children's and young people's connection with nature.
- » Focus on clean food, clean water, and clean air for every citizen in the region.
- » Create a community of volunteers to support various events and promote mutual aid among

people.

- » Expand the cultural program with new events and festivals, including more sports, culinary, and children's events.
- » Stop cutting down trees to make way for residential buildings.
- » Renew and improve public transport routes.
- » Decentralize industry and create economic activity in all settlements across the region.
- » Work together with businesses to ensure fair pay, more social benefits, and better working conditions.
- » Optimize processes and the work of the municipal administration.
- » Improve the quality of repair works, maintenance, and protection of municipal property.
- » All institutions, organizations, and citizens in the city should work together, leaving personal disagreements in the past.
- » There should be more social programs that genuinely address citizens' problems.
- » Create a dedicated unit where people in need can seek and receive the necessary help, regardless of the type of assistance required.
- » Provide opportunities for everyone who wants to contribute with knowledge, work, or ideas to join suitable projects.
- » Organize free public events on diverse topics focused on people and their needs.
- » Host events covering all aspects of life that unite and develop people, making every citizen part of the community.
- » Offer various free courses and training programs where people in financially disadvantaged situations can upgrade their knowledge and skills.
- » Increase greenery in cities and villages and plant fruit trees.
- » Create recreation areas in nature.

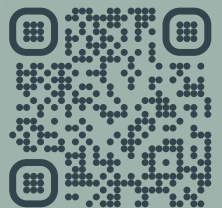
- » Achieve real unity and solidarity among people for the common good and to preserve the population across all settlements in the region.
- » Focus on a dignified standard of living for every person in the region, protecting the environment, and ensuring accessible education and healthcare for all.
- » Renovate existing and create new tourist routes.
- » Develop a modern urban plan with residential buildings spaced far enough apart and with green areas between them.
- » Ensure good and regular connections via eco-friendly public transport between all settlements in the region.
- » The future of the region depends on the personal motivation of all citizens.
- » Build a park with a playground in the Zheleznik neighborhood.
- » Repair URGENTLY AND NECESSARILY the small asphalt paths between apartment blocks and create beautiful photo corners in the city.
- » The future of the region depends on the personal motivation of all citizens.
- » Ensure good and regular connections via eco-friendly public transport between all settlements in the region.
- » I see cycling infrastructure.
- » Develop more cultural events. And most importantly: how can the city retain its young people after they finish school.
- » Stop cutting down green areas in parks and giving them away for construction of residential or industrial buildings.
- » Ensure safe transport for children in cars (use of child seats and seat belts).
- » Children under 150 cm in height should not ride in the front seats of cars.
- » Stara Zagora is a city with great potential for growth, suitable for young and open-minded people.
- » Provide transport from Pavel Banya town to the Pavel Banya railway stop.
- » I disagree with excessive digitalization – there should be more places for social activities.
- » The municipality needs clean air and professional governance; economic policy should not serve political strategies.
- » If coal technologies are meant – I do not agree.
- » Pay more attention to existing recreational and sports sites. Establish a working group to maintain Ayazmoto Park and remove dry trees.
- » Ban old diesel cars and trucks over 15 years old!
- » No diesel vehicles over 15 years old!!!

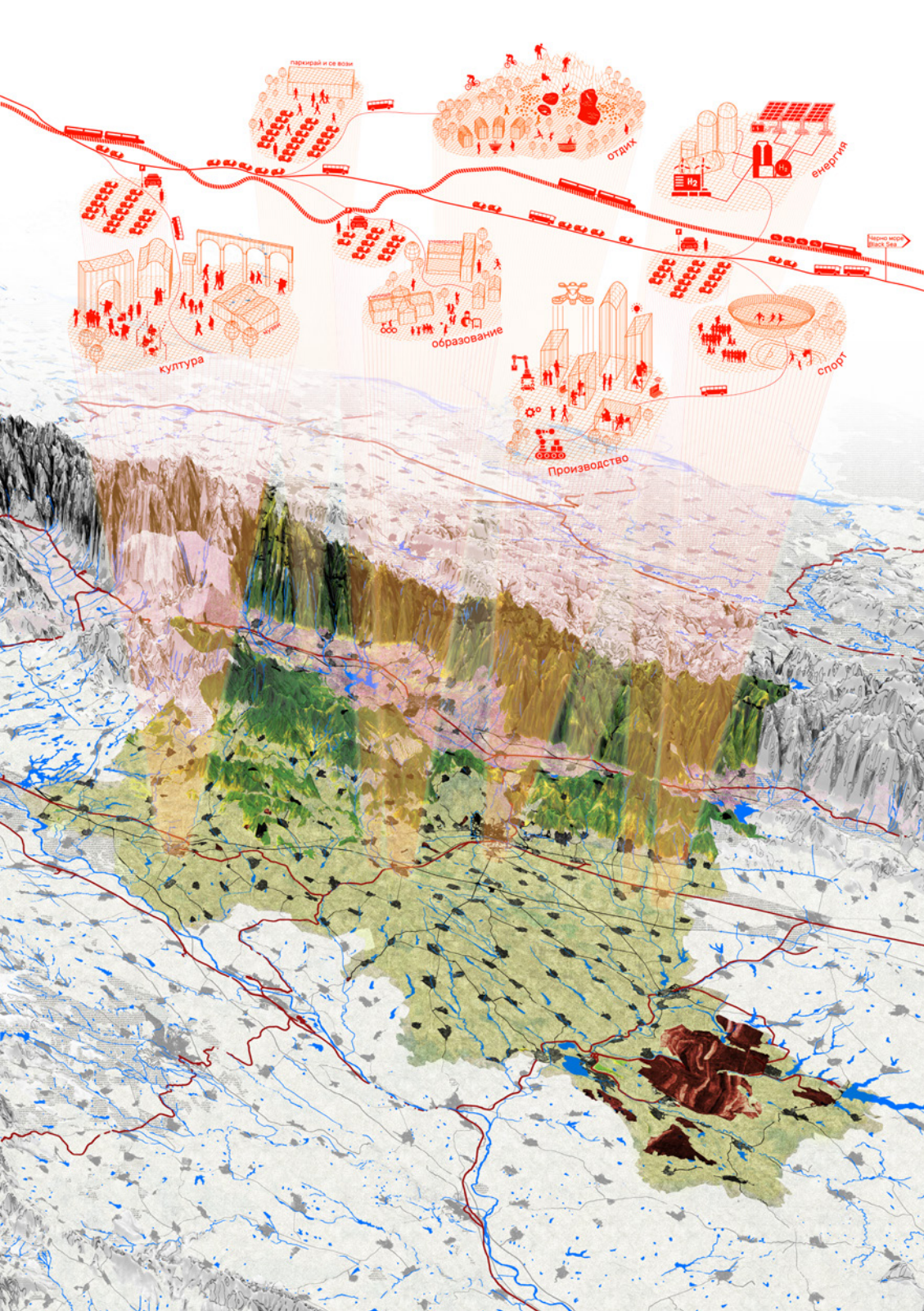


DUST

Democratising
jUst
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Transitions

Scan the QR
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out more about
our project!





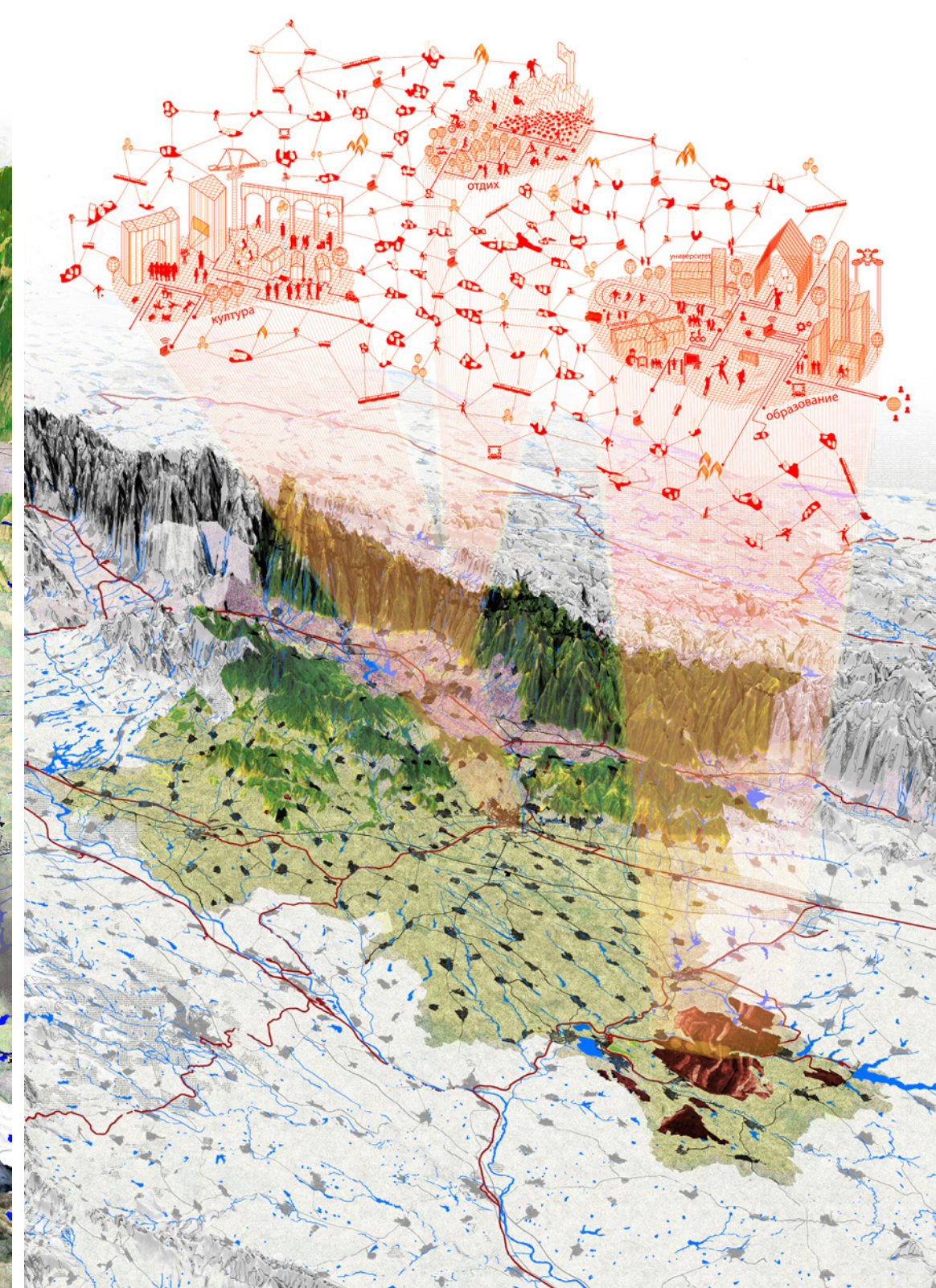
Визия за региона Стара Загора според регионалната политика

A vision for the Stara Zagora region according to regional policy



Страховете и мечтите на жителите за региона Стара Загора

Citizens' fears and dreams of the Stara Zagora region



Предпочитаното бъдеще на гражданите за региона Стара Загора

Citizens' preferred future for the Stara Zagora region



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TU Delft

Artwork by 00ZE architects & urbanists.
With support of Malgorzata Rybak, Delft University of Technology.