

Towards a Just Transition in Ireland and the European Union: A critical overview of the policy frameworks

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Abstract

This article is primarily a scene-setting one, which aims to give the reader both European Union (EU) and Irish institutional and policy context for this special edition. It presents and discusses the EU and national institutional and policy contexts relevant to the Just Transition (JT) and addresses relevant aspects and issues. Our interest is in the institutions and policies that shape or limit our capacity to change the conversation to what is needed to advance a transformational agenda that conjoins climate and equality as twin goals and enables integrated and inclusive governance. Our focus on the JT is because, as a concept, it interfaces climate policy and social justice.

The article sketches the EU policy framework as it relates to climate and social policy observing the lack of coherence between them and difficulties in advancing fast and fair transition and transformation. Delving into the contemporary EU policy framework for JT enables us to unpack the social pillar of the European Green Deal. The paper's analysis of the Irish policy infrastructure, its statutory basis, and planning and assessment process allows us to analyse Irish climate policy. Our outline of the recent evolution of Ireland's JT Framework, highlights how the establishment of the Irish JT Commission in 2024 and plans to give it statutory status in 2025 make Ireland a leader in the EU. Europeanisation is a characteristic of JT in Ireland.

Introduction

This article is primarily a scene-setting one which aims to give the reader both European Union (EU) and Irish institutional and policy context for this special edition. It presents and discusses the EU and national institutional and policy contexts relevant to a Just Transition (JT) and addresses relevant aspects and issues. Our interest is in the institutions and policies that shape or limit our capacity to change the conversation to what is needed to advance a transformational agenda that conjoins climate and equality as twin goals. Our focus on JT is because as a concept it interfaces climate policy and social justice. The first section sketches the EU policy framework as it relates to climate and social policy highlighting the lack of coherence between them and difficulties in advancing fast and fair transition and transformation. The subsequent section presents the contemporary EU policy framework for JT, which represents the social pillar of the European Green Deal (EGD). This sets the scene for the following section of the paper which traces the policy infrastructure for Irish climate policy, its statutory basis, and planning and assessment process. The final section outlines the recent evolution of Ireland's JT Framework, which culminated in the setting up of the Irish JT Commission (JTC) in 2024 and plans for its statutory establishment in 2025. We conclude by assessing the degree of Europeanisation characterising the transformative agenda for a JT in Ireland.

While providing a bird's eye view of the current EU and Irish institutional frameworks for climate mitigation, we particularly emphasise the social dimension of such frameworks. The green transition will create significant distributional challenges on top of the direct risks connected to climate change (Gough et al., 2008). In this context, JT has gained widespread traction in academic and political discourse. Originating within the North American labour movement in the 1980s, the idea of a JT has made its way into United Nations climate policies and is embedded in the 2016 Paris Agreement. The International Labour Organization defines a JT more specifically in terms of social, environmental and economic justice. In this view, transitions to environmentally and socially sustainable economies can become a strong driver of job creation, job upgrading, social justice and poverty eradication (International Labour Organization, 2015). In the academic literature, this concept has been explored across various themes and disciplines (Wang & Lo, 2021), evolving into a 'contested concept' with diverse interpretations (Stavis et al., 2020), including

iterations of ‘fair’ as well as ‘equitable’ transition. In the realm of public policies, the concept of JT goes hand in hand with the concept of ‘eco-social policies’ (Mandelli, 2022a; Murphy, 2023), emphasising the role of the welfare state in developing public policies that integrate environmental and social protection goals.

The various existing definitions of JT all have a focus on the social justice implications of ecological transitions in common. Most definitions concentrate on decarbonisation, hence the process of moving towards a low-carbon or even net-zero economic system. In this sense, JT can be defined as ‘a fair and equitable process of moving towards a post-carbon society’ (McCauley & Heffron, 2018, p. 2). Ensuring justice in a sustainability transition implies considering both the outcome and the process of decarbonisation (Galgóczi, 2020). Indeed, there are typically three dimensions to a JT: a distributive dimension, pertaining to the allocation of costs and benefits; a procedural dimension, concerning decision-making processes, practices and institutions; and a recognition dimension, acknowledging human dignity and identities, especially of subaltern groups (European Environment Agency (EEA), 2024). As it will be later specified, the JT concept assumes peculiar interpretations in the EU and Irish context: it is expressed in the EGD by the ‘leaving no one behind’ principle (European Commission (EC), 2019, p. 4) and, in Ireland, it is disentangled into four principles enshrined in the *Climate Action Plan 2021*, which acknowledges the need for a fair and inclusive transition (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2021; see also Moore and Garvey in this special edition).

‘Doughnut economics’ is a way of assessing economic, social and environmental performance (Raworth, 2017).¹ The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) report discuss a 2015 analysis that found that while no country met human need within planetary

¹ The inner circle of the doughnut represents a social foundation with twelve dimensions derived from the United Nations sustainable development goals (food security, health, education, income and work, peace and justice, political voice, social equity, gender equality, housing, networks, energy, and water). The outer circle of the doughnut represents an ecological ceiling or nine ‘planetary boundaries’: climate change; biodiversity loss and species extinction; ozone depletion; ocean acidification; phosphorus and nitrogen cycles; land-system change (e.g. deforestation); freshwater use; atmospheric aerosol loading; and introduction of novel entities (e.g. organic pollutants, radioactive materials, nanomaterials, and microplastics). The space between these two circles represents a socially secure and safe space where human needs of everyone are met without compromising the earth’s planetary boundaries.

boundaries some middle-income countries, like Costa Rica, came close (NESC, 2023). Ireland performed relatively well among the richer countries, with a high level of achievement in terms of social indicators but failed to meet any of the biophysical boundaries included in this study. Raworth believes Ireland can, as a small state, demonstrate leadership in meeting human needs within planetary boundaries.

Setting the scene – European climate and social institutions and policies

This section very briefly highlights some of the key policy contexts relevant to EU-level conversations about climate change and inequality. Providing a comprehensive list of all EU social and climate measures falls out of the scope of this paper: the objective of this section is rather to provide a general overview of the current policy context, highlighting its core characteristics, as highlighted in the literature. In recent years, at a structural level, the green transition has moved rapidly in global, EU and Irish priorities, and needs to be understood in the context of geopolitical crisis, pressures associated with EU enlargement, as well as other crisis, including care, inequality, cost of living and political volatility. This special edition drafted in 2024 and published in 2025 was written in a context of particularly significant European and national change which was still evolving at a global geopolitical level and with the EU. The impact on the most recent dynamics has been largely negative reversing the prioritisation of climate change in favour of competitiveness, security and defence.

Up to the 2024 EU elections, the EU climate policy approach could be understood as the result of a long-term effort not only to expand supranational competencies in the environment and climate policy fields (Halpern, 2010), but also to make them mutually reinforcing. Since the early 2000s, the EU has been one of the global champions of the sustainable development paradigm, promoting, at least on paper, a reconciliation between the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainability (Domorenok, 2019). However, there is a significant disjuncture between climate and social goals with different institutional mechanisms, competences and political agendas informing the different policy ambitions. This mirrors the difficulty of working within and across different siloed functions to integrate action towards intersectional goals (Sabato & Vanhille, 2024). A coherent anti-poverty strategy and JT strategy, would, for example, require

implementation of a gender equality strategy that tackled gender pay and pension gaps and advanced accessibility and affordability of care, while also contributing to achieving emissions reduction targets. The hierarchy of goals mean fiscal and monetary priorities are closely followed by competitiveness, these trump both environmental and social policy, with the latter at the bottom of the hierarchy (Laurent, 2021). The commitment of the EU to pursue sustainable development and to reconcile social, environmental and economic goals is hampered by the primacy of the growth imperative and by a lacklustre integration between social and environmental policies and this was the case before competitiveness, security and defence have been the core priorities.

Despite these limitations, some crucial advancements have characterised EU climate policymaking in the past decade. Most notably, in December 2019, the EC, the then first time and newly elected president, Ursula von der Leyen, introduced the EGD comprising eight principal areas for action (EC, 2019):

- (a) Increasing the climate ambition of the EU for 2030 and 2050;
- (b) Supplying clean, affordable and secure energy;
- (c) Mobilising industry for a clean and circular economy;
- (d) Building and renovating in an energy and resource-efficient way;
- (e) Accelerating the shift to sustainable and smart mobility;
- (f) Designing a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system (from farm to fork);
- (g) Preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity;
- (h) A zero-pollution ambition for a toxic-free environment.

Since 2019, the EC has put forward various measures to enhance the EGD green growth strategy. For instance, the Next Generation EU and related Recovery and Resilience Facility were designed to cushion the socio-economic effects of Covid-19, but member states were also prompted to channel at least 37 per cent of the funding from this facility toward climate mitigation efforts, ensuring no harm ensues from financed activities. Furthermore, the 2021 Fit for 55 package (part of the European Climate Law) is a comprehensive bundle of proposals aimed at achieving the target of reducing EU emissions by at least 55 per cent by 2030 (EC, 2021), while the 2023 Commission proposal for the Green Deal Industrial Plan features with the explicit intention of enabling the promotion of clean technology manufacturing (EC, 2023).

The proactive policy intervention of the European Union in the climate sphere is mirrored by similar innovations in social policies. Vanhercke et al. (2024) describe recent advances in EU social policy up to 2024 as a ‘social paradigm shift in the shadow of austerity and competitiveness reload’, thus highlighting the clear interdependencies between social and economic policy. After a long break during the austerity years, recently, and especially since the Covid-19 crisis, there has been a resurgence of ‘Social Europe’ (Kyriazi et al., 2025). Up to 2024, social policy had been advancing through the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) (EC, 2017). Established in 2017 under the Juncker Commission, the EPSR serves as a guiding framework for improving social and employment standards across Europe. It sets twenty non-binding principles to guide the governance of European labour markets and welfare systems, structured into three thematic chapters: a) equal opportunities and access to the labour market; b) fair working conditions; and c) social protection and inclusion.

The debate has always been inconclusive about the extent to which the EGD is in any way socially, or economically transformative, and the question can also be asked of its potential for industrial and environmental transformation (Almedia et al., 2023). Following the May 2024 EU elections which changed the political composition of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen was reappointed president of the EC. However, a new policy agenda is advancing, with fears that geopolitical challenges may result in more conservative approaches, for example with concern for public debt sustainability and defence capacity, security, growth and competitiveness assuming priority over climate mitigation and JT objectives, resulting in less alignment of fiscal, green and social objectives. Real progress requires recalibration of EU competitiveness and the internal market to integrate social and environmental objectives. More integrated and coherent governance arrangements could include social and civil dialogue structures, EU economic governance, EU funds and legislative procedures, as well as strengthening the ‘socio-ecological dimension’ of the new 2026 Action Plan to implement the EPSR.

The EEA (2024) use of a systems perspective to integrate justice across EU sectoral policies is a useful indication of the growing capacity for integrated thinking and governance. The EEA identifies the following integrated governance challenges for more transformational eco-social policy: the importance of adapting a systems approach to climate change, of considering the local context, the need for capacity-building and participation, effective multilevel

governance, the need for a balanced and just phase-out and just build-up and the need for constant monitoring and evaluation.

The European Union Just Transition Policy Framework

The gradually emerging EU JT framework is the focus of this section, which maps various policy orientations and instruments that may enable a socio-ecological transition in the EU and its member states. This is needed to achieve green objectives while meeting related social challenges. The EGD acknowledges that ‘careful attention will have to be paid when there are potential trade-offs between economic, environmental and social objectives’ (EC, 2019) and is explicit about some social and negative implications of decarbonisation, including employment disturbances in fossil fuel and hard-to-abate sectors, and rising energy and transport costs which impact low-income households more severely. To cope with these issues, and in part to boost the social acceptance of the EGD, there is explicit endorsement of a JT approach, in an attempt to leave ‘no one behind’ (EC, 2019). In this sense, JT is a transversal objective in the EGD, and should, on paper, inform all the other actions stemming from this grand strategy. The 2020 communication *A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions* explicitly connects the EGD to the 2017 EPSR, to represent the EU’s ‘social strategy to make sure that the transitions of climate neutrality, digitalisation and demographic change are socially fair and just’ (EC, 2020, p. 2, Rasnača, 2017).

To tackle issues related to industrial decarbonisation, the JT Mechanism was already proposed in the 2019 Communication on the EGD. Three principal EU policy instruments are proposed to implement the EGD JT commitments (Sabato & Mandelli, 2024; Sabato & Vanhille, 2024). The most important, a JT Fund, was adopted in 2021 (EU, 2021) to fund economic diversification, reskilling and active labour markets in territories reliant on carbon-intensive industries. Its scope entails territories with a high share of employment either in the fossil fuel sector – coal, lignite, oil shale and peat – or in energy-intensive industries. The financial envelope of the JT is 17.5 billion and covers the period 2021–7, with finance coming both from the EU budget and the Next Generation EU. The fund is administered as a cohesion policy that member states can access by drawing up territorial JT plans, there is also a dedicated JT Platform. The other two pillars of the JT Mechanism are a public sector loan facility and the Invest EU JT scheme, which foster public and private investments respectively.

A second notable policy instrument from a socio-ecological perspective is the 2023 Social Climate Fund, proposed in 2021 to accompany the publication of the Fit for 55 package and inclusion of building and road transport sectors in the Emissions Trading System scheme, and expected growth in fossil fuel prices for European consumers (EU, 2023). The Fund due to run between 2026 and 2032, is funded by revenues from the reformed Emissions Trading System and national resources, it is expected to amount to 86.7 billion – with the actual amount depending on ETS II auctions (approximately 65 billion) – with an additional 25 per cent covered by national resources. The Social Climate Fund is designed to assist vulnerable households, microenterprises, and transport users facing rising electricity and mobility costs associated with decarbonisation. It is limited to supporting two main types of initiatives: investments (in building renovations, affordable energy-efficient housing, decarbonised buildings, and low-emission mobility and transport systems); and direct income support to vulnerable energy and transport users (maximum of 37.5 per cent of the allocated resources). Member states ‘social climate plans’, should establish their spending priorities. Besides these two flagship funding measures, several EU funds – including the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Cohesion Funds and the Modernisation Fund – can contribute to the achievement of JT objectives (EEA, 2024).

Finally, some nonbinding measures are also part of the EU JT policy architecture. The 2022 Council Recommendation on ‘ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality’, provides nonbinding advice for designing comprehensive and coherent national policy reforms in the field of JT (Council of the EU, 2022). The Energy Union governance process entails a system of monitoring national energy and climate policies through dedicated multiannual plans – the so-called national energy and climate plan – which, among other things, should also contain an evaluation of the expected social impact of climate measures – notably on jobs and energy and transport poverty – as well as indications on how countries are planning to respond to such issues (Mandelli, 2022b).

All of the above points to a timid but growing process of integration between climate and social objectives at the EU level, with the JT Fund and Social Climate Fund constituting prototypical supranational eco-social policies. However there are significant limitations (Crespy & Munta, 2023; Sabato & Mandelli, 2024). Eco-social policies within the EGD appear insufficient, the narrow social dimension

incorporated into EU green growth policies addresses only the most pressing risks of decarbonisation. The scope of the JT framework is limited geographically and in a temporal fashion, resulting in relatively modest funds that will benefit only a small proportion of EU citizens. A more preventive, long-term, universal and generous approach, in line with the ideal of eco-social policies., is evidently absent. Consistent with the broader growth-centred neoliberal approach of the EU, the JT framework gives priority to productivist investment, emphasising infrastructural projects, economic development and green jobs creation. Here, social policies are seen primarily as mechanisms to support participation in the green economy, namely through active labour market policies and skills. The proposal for future temporary income support for vulnerable energy and transport consumers under the Social Climate Fund is limited but a welcome exception and closer to income protection.

Despite its limits, the current EU JT framework can still be viewed as an important first step in the construction of an eco-social welfare future for the EU (Murphy, 2023). Indeed its emergence is puzzling in the context of the lack of competencies of the EU on socio-ecological matters, as well as its siloed policy-making tradition. An unprecedented window of opportunity opened up in the EU in the years between 2018 and 2019 (Kyriazi & Miró, 2022). This included mobilisation of new climate change social movements across Europe, which impacted the salience of climate change in the 2019 European elections and, unprecedented growth of green political groups, which in turn influenced Ursula von der Leyen – seeking legitimacy for her candidacy for the role of Commission President – to propose the EGD and to include a social dimension within it (Graziano, 2024). Von der Leyen's new JT agenda was able to quickly gather broad support among most political and civil society EU actors. Nonetheless, political conflicts still emerged during the negotiations behind the Social Climate Fund and JT Fund, demonstrating that the politics of the EU Just Transformation is far from consensual. Such conflicts had to do with funding generosity, separating creditors from debtor countries; green conditionalities, pitting EU climate leaders against laggards; and the social component of the two funds (Kyriazi & Miró, 2022; Crespy & Munta, 2023). At the time, political negotiations managed to appease these conflicts.

However, at the moment of writing, in March 2025, the political momentum that brought the EGD and the JT framework to life in 2019, appears somewhat dissipated at EU level. The energy and cost-

of-living crises, together with the unstable geopolitical context, have increasingly led populist and radical-right parties to rally against the green transition and the EGD, while the European centre-right has also adopted more cautious stances. The 2024 European elections, where green and progressive parties lost significant ground, can be seen a form of ‘green backlash’, while the turbulence in the demand-side of climate politics was dramatically exemplified by the European-wide farmers’ protests in 2023 and 2024 (Bocquillon, 2024). However, while so-called far-right parties, had some gains in the 2024 elections, they did not do as well as was predicted indicating that slowing down the progress in environmental policy implementation is a very complex and wide-ranging issue.

Indeed, some parts of the JT agenda of the EGD appear to be resilient, making it hard for conservative actors to dismantle the overall EGD and its social dimension. Campaigners are advancing conjoined social and ecological goals, exemplified by the 2024 Belgian Presidency placing JT among its core priorities, as well as the reinforcement of EU-level advocacy coalitions, such as the European Alliance for a Just Transition. There is also the positive appointment of Teresa Ribera in 2024 as a new Commissioner for a ‘clean, just and competitive transition’ overseeing this across three different directorates, and the establishment of a European ‘Fair’ Transition Observatory. However, such positive assessment is nuanced by the overall direction of reprioritisation of EU policy.

Irish climate institutions and policies

This third section of the paper now traces the policy infrastructure for Irish climate policy, including the role and processes of climate legislation and institutions like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); see also the interview in this special edition with Laura Burke, retiring Director General, EPA. Under 2015 legislation, the Climate Change Advisory Council (CCAC) was established, tasking the EPA with provision of secretarial and administrative services (the role of the EPA is discussed in an interview with retiring EPA Director General Laura Burke in the Forum section of this special issue). The CCAC has since developed into an authoritative independent advisory body providing evidence-based advice and recommendations on policy to support Ireland’s JT to a biodiversity-rich, environmentally sustainable, climate-neutral and resilient society. The institutional framework for Irish climate policy has its legislative basis in the

Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 and in the five-year framework of the Irish climate action plans, which are published by the government's Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. The EPA has a climate change programme dedicated to addressing climate change challenges. Its functions include collating and regulating national greenhouse gas emissions and projections; facilitating climate engagement through its role in the National Dialogue on Climate Action; conducting and supporting research on attitudes and behaviours on climate change; supporting Climate Ireland, Ireland's national adaptation platform; delivering Ireland's national climate change risk assessment and supporting climate change research. An Institute of Public Administration (2024) assessment of this policy infrastructure highlights investment and improvements but also growing complexity with increased demands for reporting along with issues of capacity, administrative burdens, reporting deficits and implementation gaps.

Like in the rest of the EU, Irish environmental policy is dominated by a technocratic green growth ideology, the key driver of which is economic growth (Murphy, 2023, and see introduction). Until recently, Ireland repeatedly ranked among the worst in the EU Climate Change Performance Index and was known as a climate laggard (Torney, 2020). Following pressure from the Irish environmental movement and citizen mobilisation, the government convened a Citizens' Assembly in 2017, entitled 'How the state can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change' (Citizens' Assembly, 2018), and later declared a climate emergency. A 2020 Draft Climate Action Bill was weak on definitions, targets, carbon budgets, and goals relating to biodiversity and environmental sustainability. However, since then, a significant political shift has been demonstrated by more ambitious national emission reduction objectives in the aforementioned Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021). In line with the EGD, Irish targets are to achieve an ambitious 51 per cent emissions reduction by 2030 compared to 2018 and a climate-neutral economy by the end of 2050. Legislative carbon budgets support Ireland's climate ambition and the EPA monitors the climate action plan's targets for environmental sustainability. The EPA, in June 2022, published its first set of projections related to the Climate Act's targets, concluding that full implementation of all existing climate plans and policies, plus further new measures, are needed to put the

country on track for climate neutrality by 2050, and that there is a considerable ‘gap’ between all scenario projections and the 2030 target (EPA, 2024a). Subsequent evaluations have reinforced this finding (EPA, 2024b).

Ireland’s climate change assessment (EPA, 2024a) as a process aimed at contributing to national dialogue and engagement on climate change, its initial reports were to be a key framing exercise. Modelled on the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, it localised the United Nations’ process for Ireland and used a cocreation process between leading Irish academics and officials from across state agencies and government departments. Four reports and a synthesis report (including a summary for policymakers) are offered as ‘a resource for understanding climate change in an Irish context across the underlying science, mitigation and adaptation measures, and opportunities’ (EPA, 2024a, foreword). Ireland’s climate action progress was recently benchmarked as shifting from a laggard to a leader (Friends of the Earth Ireland, 2024), yet this positive assessment denies the reality that Ireland will likely fail to meet its 2030 carbon emission targets, with considerable gaps in agriculture and transport (EPA 2024b, Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, 2024; CCAC, 2024). The EPA (2024c) *Climate Change in the Irish Mind* maps climate opinion and shows how climate change beliefs, risk perceptions, and policy support vary at the county and regional levels. The 2024 assessment finds 95 per cent of people think climate change is happening, is mostly human-caused (53 per cent) or is caused about equally by human activities and natural changes (39 per cent). Eighty-one per cent of people in Ireland are at least ‘somewhat worried’ and 34 per cent are ‘very worried’ about climate change. Support for action on climate change declined slightly since the previous survey. There is little in the public discourse that questions the overall economic rationale behind key policy decisions or links reducing inequality and climate success.

In 2023, the NESI undertook a comprehensive analysis of the range of social, economic and environmental indicators available to assess Ireland’s progress. It concluded that in many respects Ireland is a thriving, inclusive, protective, and forward-looking country, but that a number of caveats and key deficits need to be addressed. While Ireland ranks relatively high on many metrics, there are also obvious, significant areas for improvement; for example, addressing the vulnerability experienced by lone parents, people with disabilities, young people, migrants and ethnic minorities.

The NESC found that there is no one ideal measure of a country's performance, and that chosen indicators to assess Ireland's well-being framework need to be constantly reviewed. They conclude that there is a lack of evidence to show that 'decoupling' economic growth and carbon emissions reduction can be achieved at the scale and speed required to live within planetary boundaries. In line with the EPA (2024a) assessments, the NESC finds more must be done on environmental sustainability and for the Ireland of tomorrow. Kirby and Murphy's (2024) assessment of Ireland's model of development also finds capacity and distributional issues, that stem, in part, from Ireland's underdeveloped welfare capacity as well as over-reliance on taxes and transfers to reduce market inequalities, and consequent underinvestment in key services and social and economic deficits. They find the foreign direct investment dominated model of political economy has not served social ambitions and has negative implications for fiscal and industrial policy, with over-reliance on key sectors (property and banking) and on a small number of multinational firms for corporation taxes, and a failure to tax wealth or develop appropriate taxation policy relative to national income.

The Irish Just Transformation Policy Framework

Mandelli (2023), in a study of EU member states national climate policies, found Ireland was one of only six EU countries to adopt policies in response to the social risks of decarbonisation, explicitly pursuing a JT at the domestic level. This response was prompted by the escalating crisis of the peat sector in Ireland (for more on this policy process see Mandelli, 2025). In 2015, Bord na Móna, Ireland's primary peat-harvesting company, announced plans to phase out peat to comply with national climate targets. In July 2019, Ireland's national planning authority denied the state-owned electricity provider ESB permission to continue burning peat. As political debate around Ireland's climate policy advanced, so did the parliamentary discussion around a Just Transition. Importantly, a Citizens' Assembly issued a report on climate action in April 2018, endorsing JT principles (Citizens' Assembly, 2018), which was followed by a JT recommendation from the Joint Oireachtas (Parliamentary) Committee on Climate Action in March 2019.

The Irish JT policy framework started to take shape in 2019 when the first climate action plan contained Ireland's strategy for a JT, aligning with the recommendations from the parliamentary committee

(Government of Ireland, 2019a) and affirming the government's commitment to a 'global just transition'. Most commitments in the *Climate Action Plan 2019* were vague and nonbinding, as the only concrete JT measure was to phase out peat. The 2019 Budget (Government of Ireland, 2019b) introduced a 11 million National JT Fund to finance 'innovative projects that contribute to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of regions which are most affected by the transition away from fossil fuels or greenhouse-gas-intensive industrial processes' (Government of Ireland, 2020, p. 4).

In November 2019, Kieran Mulvey was appointed interim JT Commissioner, with a mandate to engage with stakeholders in the Midlands and provide recommendations to the government on JT. Over time this mandate was renewed until 2022, and Mulvey published four progress reports. Furthermore, a dedicated Review Group within the NESC was made responsible for identifying and assessing 'transition needs' among different social groups and to encourage social dialogue around Just Transition. The influential NESC definition of JT is now adopted in climate legislation (see also Moore and Garvey's paper in this special edition).

Subsequent policy developments unfolded under the new 2020–4 coalition government with Green Party leader Eamon Ryan, Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications. Updated climate action plans were published in November 2021 and December 2022, and enshrined into law through the 2021 Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021). While these renewals of the climate action plan represent positive developments, critiques point to slowness in the implementation of these plans and to failure in assessment and monitoring (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2023). The 2021 climate action plan recognises the need for the transition to occur in a fair and inclusive manner through the following four principles for a JT (NESC, 2020):

- An integrated, structured, and evidence-based approach to identify and plan our response to JT requirements.
- People are equipped with the right skills to be able to participate in and benefit from the future net-zero economy.
- The costs are shared so that the impact is equitable and existing inequalities are not exacerbated.
- Social dialogue to ensure impacted citizens and communities are empowered and are core to the transition process.

The Irish Territorial JT Plan was published in 2022 (Government of Ireland, 2022a) to channel the EU JT Fund at the national level (replacing the earlier and smaller 11 million Irish fund). EU financial resources – up to 84.5 million – to be cofinanced through national schemes are targeted to wider Midlands, mirroring but extending priorities of the former national fund.

After two legislative proposals and an interim taskforce a JTC was finally established on an administrative basis on 30 April 2024 (to be placed on a statutory basis in 2025). The JTC mission is to support the government in its responsibility to ensure that Ireland's climate policies have regard to the requirement for a Just Transition, which endeavours, in so far as practicable, to maximise employment opportunities, and to support people and communities that may be negatively affected by the transition. The functions of the JTC involve preparing and analysing strategic evidence-based research in relation to Just Transition; evaluating, advising, and commenting on policy planning, implementation and progress; providing strategic advice, and promoting engagement on Just Transition, including at the sectoral or regional levels. The ten members of the JTC were appointed on 22 October 2024, comprising five representatives from the five pillars of social dialogue (business labour, agriculture, community and voluntary and environmental pillars) and six individual experts, including Ali Sheridan as the Chair (Government of Ireland, 2024).

Mandelli (2023, 2025) observes three crucial JT deficits in the Irish policy framework. First, the strategic objectives set up within the climate action plan promote a reactive approach to JT, with a narrow scope, limited resources, and a focus on urgent short-term issues. While the climate action plan pledges to support all communities affected by the low-carbon transition, it lacks a long-term and whole-economy approach. Peat is the only sector receiving considerable attention in the 2019 plan, as well as its 2021 and 2023 updates (Government of Ireland, 2022b). The modest funding allocation is mirrored in limited time horizons of the climate action plans, spanning only one to two years. Second, the principal policy instrument put forward to address the social risks of the green transition, the Irish JT Fund (and EU Fund), primarily focuses on social and green investments which foster economic development and active labour market policies. This striking growth-orientation might ironically give rise to new environmental externalities associated with energy and material throughput of growth. Income support is ineligible for

funding, so there is little space for social protection (Government of Ireland, 2020, p. 16). Third, governance processes and procedures are mixed, centralised government decision-making and oversight is combined with multistakeholder consultation through the NESC, albeit the October 2024 appointments of the JTC may mean a more structured approach to engaging stakeholders in the policymaking process.

Two factors have been particularly crucial in the politics of JT in Ireland (Mandelli, 2025). Societal groups acting, since 2018, as policy entrepreneurs exploited the window of opportunity of the acceleration of the peat-sector crisis in the Midlands, and the increasing salience of climate change within the national political debate. In Dublin, a composite group of influential trade unions and green nongovernmental organisations — Siptu, Forsa, Friends of the Earth, Stop Climate Chaos, and TASC – created a JT Alliance. In the Midlands, local authorities, trade unions, and Bord na Móna formed the Midlands Regional Transition Team, and exerted pressure on the national government to address regional employment challenges and foster new business opportunities. The social demands of these two alliances influenced the partisan competition surrounding Irish climate policymaking. In particular left-wing opposition parties reflected trade unions and nongovernmental organisations’ JT demands in their work within the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action. Members of the parliament from Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil championed the Midlands Regional Transition Team JT measures for peat workers and communities. These twofold dynamics put pressure on the minority Fine Gael government, eager to gain a wide political and societal consensus for their climate policy agenda and aware that adopting a JT policy framework would help achieve this consensus.

Conclusion

In summary, much like at the EU level, the politics of JT in Ireland was characterised by dynamics of strategic exchanges between and within political parties and organised interest groups. Whether such a complex and unusual configuration of political drivers can be maintained, and strengthened to promote more transformative policy changes, remains an open question. Ireland, along with other EU member states, is currently navigating the EU-wide poly-crisis and the

environmental backlash, while the Green Party lost eleven of its twelve seats in the late 2024 general election.

Earlier critique of the Irish JT policy framework characterised it as reactive and growth-oriented with little space for social protection or societal participation. It appeared to fail as a tool for transformative or paradigmatic socio-ecological change, rather it was incremental in nature, aiming to adjust the status quo at the margins. As such, it is likely to perpetuate Ireland's path-dependence on a neoliberal, reactive and centralised welfare regime, potentially leading to an 'unjust transition' (Mercier et al., 2020). It remains to be seen whether recent policy developments consolidating the Irish JT framework, such as the appointment of a JTC, reflect a more ambitious approach. Apart from Spain, such JT ambition is rare in the EU.

Moving forward it is difficult to assess whether and how Ireland can, starting from the existing incremental JT framework, move towards a more transformative agenda, including, for example, an eco-social welfare state. The lesson for those interested in transformational change, seems to be that, as Mandelli (2025) observed broad, coalition-building and pragmatic use of windows of opportunity, are crucial. With this in mind, the conclusion focuses on the relationship between European and domestic policy.

The concept of 'Europeanisation' helps us examine how domestic change can be caused by European integration and suggests such influence happens via different causal processes (van Vliet & Koster, 2011). A key issue for consideration, discussed earlier, is the degree to which environmental and social policies are informed by different competencies. The impact of the EU on Irish social policy is above all influenced positively and negatively by EU economic policy and the macro EU model. Since 2013, social policy and social inclusion objectives have been processed through the European Semester (and its country-specific recommendations) and coordinated in the Social Investment Package and increasingly integrated into the EPSR.

Of course it is essential that Ireland also influences EU transformational developments. While it was not the focus of this article to elaborate on the possible relationship (or lack thereof) between the EU and Ireland JT frameworks, it is useful to assess the degree to which one has had influence on the development or characteristics of the other, and the direction of travel any influence takes. Ireland stands out, for instance, as the first country to place a JTC on a statutory basis and the EC is interested in learning from this national experience. Given many social policy remits can only be progressed at EU level through 'soft' approaches such as shared

learning, there is much to be learnt from innovative approaches and early initiatives.

The extent to which the EU JT framework has been able to influence similar developments in domestic policies remains doubtful. ‘Europeanisation’ of the JT agenda remains a distant prospect. A comparative analysis of recent national energy and climate plans (Mandelli, 2022b) reveals that, at the national level, only six EU countries have adopted comprehensive JT policies to address the social risks of industrial decarbonisation: Ireland, Germany, Greece, Czechia, the Netherlands, and Spain. With the sole exception of Spain – which has uniquely pursued a more transformative idea of JT – the remaining national policies mirror the limits of the supranational framework, are mostly narrow and reactive, provide few financial resources to tackle the urgent social impacts of fossil fuel phase-out, and promote workfare social policies, focusing mainly on skills and job creation. National recovery and resilience plans also fail to integrate social and ecological considerations and overemphasise infrastructural investments and active labour market policies (Sabato & Theodoropoulou, 2023).

To conclude, while beyond the focus of this article, an early assessment of Europeanisation of Irish JT policy suggests that given the boundaries of EU competencies, much EU influence is normative and political, albeit we see very direct impacts in the distribution of European funding through the JT Fund, for example, and we await the Social Climate Fund. As elsewhere, the recent geopolitical environment and pressures on security and defence may lead to resistance to increased EU influence on climate and JT policy. In Ireland, these issues will also be related to the principle of subsidiarity and/or national sovereignty. This rather than transformative policy will likely frame national debate.

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