

# Balancing workers' rights and environmental goals: trade unions and the challenge of decarbonisation in Serbia\*

## Abstract

*This article explores the challenges faced by trade unions in Serbia as the country navigates its transition to a low-carbon economy. Serbia's energy sector relies primarily on coal, which significantly contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. As the country aims for cleaner energy, the transition poses environmental and economic challenges, including potential job losses in coal-dependent regions. Trade unions are playing a crucial role in advocating workers' rights during this shift, emphasising equitable opportunities through social dialogue and collective bargaining. This research study examines the evolving role of trade unions in Serbia in addressing environmental issues and the necessary strategies for supporting workers in affected sectors. It highlights the importance of collective bargaining and social dialogue to ensure equitable outcomes amidst the economic transformations and environmental challenges that lie ahead. Ultimately, the findings call for coordinated efforts involving government, trade unions and civil society to facilitate a sustainable and inclusive transition for all stakeholders.*

**Keywords:** *green transition, decarbonisation, trade unions, Serbia, social dialogue, collective bargaining*

## Introduction

The green transition refers to the shift towards sustainable practices and policies aimed at reducing environmental impact while promoting economic growth and social equity. The transition to a low-carbon economy over the forthcoming decades constitutes a substantial global challenge. The process of decarbonisation, particularly in an economy still heavily reliant on fossil fuels, necessitates, among other factors, significant technological and industrial transformations, the establishment of innovative energy production and consumption paradigms, the formulation of new business models and an enhanced emphasis on circularity within production and consumption practices. Achieving climate objectives mandates a profound transformation in our methods of production and consumption of goods. In essence, compliance with the Paris Agreement demands an urgent and comprehensive reconfiguration of our production processes, modes of transportation and consumption patterns.

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The shift to a low-carbon economy is anticipated to have a substantial impact on workers, especially in sectors like coal mining, manufacturing and agriculture. Recognising this, trade unions globally have engaged with climate change and sustainable development for decades. The International Labour Organization (ILO) advocates ‘just transition’ policies aligned with its standards for decent work, which protect workers’ rights, offer social security and promote skills development opportunities. The roots of this commitment stretch back to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, where organised labour was first involved in environmental discussions (Rosemberg 2013). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of a ‘just transition’ gained traction and, with the founding of the Just Transition Alliance, a coalition of labour and environmental justice organisations, it became a formal demand (Güler and Demirkaya 2024). By the 2000s, the idea had solidified as individual trade unions and collective federations increasingly promoted it as a crucial approach to addressing the impacts of climate change on labour.

In 2006, trade unions convened their first Assembly on Labour and the Environment. Soon after, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) was established and has since prioritised environmental issues, further developing the framework of ‘just transition’ to support workers in the low-carbon transition (Rosemberg 2013). Recently, in 2022, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) launched the Just Transition Work Programme (JTWP) as part of the COP27 Sharm-el-Sheikh Implementation Plan, aiming to ensure that the Paris Agreement goals are pursued equitably and inclusively.

Nonetheless, trade unions are diverse, reflecting varied historical, economic and regional contexts. These differences influence how each union approaches climate change based on its members’ immediate job needs and future employment prospects in a low-carbon economy. This diversity highlights that climate policies will have an uneven impact on workers, with unions in heavy industries and energy sectors balancing the need to support their current members while preparing them for sustainable employment in a low-carbon future.

As Serbia moves toward alignment with European Union policies, including in energy, environmental regulations are becoming tighter, with significant implications for industries such as coal mining, manufacturing and agriculture. This shift presents unions with a dual challenge: safeguarding jobs while supporting Serbia’s transition to a sustainable economy. In response, unions are advocating a ‘just transition’ to ensure that workers in the affected sectors, particularly those in the coal industry, receive adequate support, retraining opportunities and new job prospects in green industries.

This article explores the challenges faced by trade unions in Serbia on its way towards a low-carbon economy. A significant portion of the text is dedicated to the green transition, focusing on how Serbia’s trade unions are adapting to environmental challenges as the country aims to align with European Union standards. Specific attention is given to Serbia’s heavy reliance on coal, the government’s commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the implications for jobs in affected sectors. The article emphasises the critical role of trade unions in advocating a just transition,

aiming to balance environmental goals with workers' rights, job security and economic equity in a changing energy landscape.

## Trade unions in Serbia

Trade unions in Serbia have a long history, influenced by the country's political and economic changes over the past century.

They began forming in the early 1900s, inspired by broader European labour movements. In 1903, the General Workers' Union of Serbia was founded, establishing a foundation for organised labour efforts. The first formal union structures emerged in industries like mining, transportation and manufacturing, where workers faced harsh conditions.

After World War I, the labour movement grew alongside the country's industrialisation. This period saw the rise of socialist and communist ideas which greatly influenced the labour movement. By the 1930s, unions were active, though often suppressed by the government for their perceived radicalism. Many union leaders joined the partisan resistance against the Axis forces.

After World War II, Serbia became part of the socialist Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia. Unions were restructured under a centralised socialist system with a dual role: they represented workers but were also tightly controlled by the state. Savez Samostalnih Sindikata Srbije (SSSS; Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia) became the main union federation, working within the one-party system to mediate labour relations. Later, Yugoslavia implemented a form of self-management, where workers had a say in the management of enterprises, blurring the lines between unions and management.

The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s had a severe impact on Serbia's economy, with inflation, unemployment and international sanctions hurting workers. During this period, unions faced significant challenges as they navigated between the collapsing state economy and a nascent private sector. Asocijacija slobodnih i nezavisnih sindikata (ASNS; Association of Free and Independent Trade Unions) and other independent unions emerged, trying to represent workers amid widespread economic instability and political turmoil.

With the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, Serbia began to transition more fully to a market economy, and the labour movement adapted to this shift. Trade unions had to respond to privatisation, the decline of state-owned enterprises and the challenges of a competitive market economy. In recent decades, Serbia's unions have focused on labour laws, social protections and efforts to align with European Union labour standards.

Trade unions in Serbia today represent workers across various sectors, advocating their rights and enhanced protections in a challenging socioeconomic environment. The main trade union confederations include SSSS, ASNS and Ujedinjeni granski sindikati 'Nezavisnost' (Trade Union Confederation 'Nezavisnost'). SSSS is the largest and oldest federation, originally formed under socialist Yugoslavia. It represents workers in both the public and private sectors and has a significant influence on Serbian labour relations. ASNS is known for its more independent

stance as it was founded as an alternative to SSSS. ASNS focuses on calling for labour rights independently of government influence and has pushed for reforms to protect workers. Established during the 1990s, *Nezavisnost* ('Independence') is well-known for its advocacy of political and economic reforms and often represents workers in the more vulnerable private sector. These federations have numerous smaller sector-specific unions under their umbrellas, addressing the needs of workers in industries like education, healthcare, manufacturing, mining and the service sector.

Serbian trade unions face declining membership, especially among younger workers who see unions as less effective in today's labour market, as is the case in many post-socialist countries. Key issues include job security, wage stagnation and the influence of multinational corporations which often have complex labour policies. Unions continue to call for stronger labour rights, fair wages and alignment with EU labour policies, though they operate in an environment where labour laws are often seen as favouring employers over workers.

### The green transition in Serbia

In Serbia, the green transition is critical due to the country's heavy reliance on fossil fuels and the urgent need to address climate change and environmental degradation. Serbia aspires to align with European Union (EU) environmental standards as part of its accession process, and a robust approach to sustainability is increasingly recognised as essential for the country's ecological health and economic resilience. Given Serbia's traditional focus on coal for energy production, particularly in mining and heavy industry sectors, transitioning to sustainable practices is challenging yet imperative.

Trade unions in Serbia are starting to view environmental sustainability as integral to labour rights, understanding that climate policies and the green transition will directly affect workers' lives. Historically, unions focused on wages, job security and working conditions, but they now recognise that environmental policies will have an impact on these issues. Many industries will face stricter EU-aligned regulations on pollution reduction, renewable energy adoption and waste management as Serbia progresses toward EU membership. For instance, coal mining – a major source of jobs and economic stability in certain regions – is likely to undergo substantial changes, leading unions to consider the social and economic impact on workers.

In response, Serbian trade unions are beginning to advocate a 'just transition' approach. Unions are calling for policies that not only meet EU environmental standards but also include social protections, such as retraining programmes for displaced workers, fair wages and health protections related to environmental factors. Moreover, unions are increasingly pushing for government and employer commitments to fund and implement transition plans that minimise job loss and ensure that affected communities can adapt economically.

### *The coal sector*

Serbia's energy sector is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions, driven largely by its heavy reliance on coal for electricity production. Coal remains the

backbone of Serbia's energy system, accounting for 67% of electricity generation as of 2021, a slight increase from the 65% recorded in 2014 and about level with the 68% which was the case in 2019 (Ruiz et al. 2021). This coal dependency is supported by a robust coal power sector which includes 14 power plants with a combined capacity of 4.3 gigawatts (GW).

Beyond power generation, coal also plays a significant role in Serbia's energy-intensive industries. In 2018 alone, around 1.4 million tons of solid fossil fuels were consumed across various sectors, with 69% used in iron and steel production and nearly 21% in non-metallic mineral production (Ruiz et al. 2021). This high coal consumption contributes to Serbia ranking among the highest in Europe for carbon emissions per capita, underscoring the urgent need for energy sector reforms. Transitioning away from coal will be vital if Serbia is to align with global climate goals and reduce its carbon footprint. Introducing cleaner energy sources, improving energy efficiency and investing in renewables such as wind, solar and hydropower are critical steps for Serbia to reduce emissions and meet its climate commitments.

In 2018, Serbia's coal sector was a significant source of employment, supporting over 15 200 direct jobs, with around 12 300 people working in coal mining and nearly 2900 in coal-fired power plants. The Belgrade region stood out as one of only two areas in the western Balkans with a coal-related workforce exceeding 10 000. In addition to these direct jobs, an estimated 37 300 positions in Serbia are indirectly tied to coal-related activities. This indirect employment dependency places Serbia at the highest level in the western Balkans, comprising 54% – in contrast, for example, to just 7% in Ukraine. Despite this extensive workforce, Serbian coal mines lag in productivity compared to those in the European Union. Although Serbia's mines lead the western Balkans in productivity, they are still significantly less efficient than their EU counterparts. Consequently, the sector's employment intensity is notably high, with four times as many employees required per unit of output compared to EU coal mines. This underscores both the economic dependence on coal for jobs and the challenges that Serbia faces in modernising its coal industry amidst the global shift toward cleaner energy sources.

The Serbian government has announced plans to decommission all coal-fired power plants with capacities below 300 megawatts (MW) by 2024 as part of its efforts to modernise the country's energy infrastructure and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This decision is primarily motivated by the outdated nature of these facilities, which are typically over 45 years old, operate with an efficiency of lower than 30% and contribute significantly to air pollution and carbon emissions (Republic of Serbia Ministry of Mining and Energy 2016). This decommissioning strategy has an impact on six of Serbia's 14 coal-fired power units.

Despite this initial step, the current Serbian energy strategy does not propose any alternative scenarios or long-term plans for additional coal plant closures. This indicates that, beyond these initial six units, further decommissioning is not anticipated. Without a broader roadmap for transitioning away from coal, Serbia risks falling short of climate and emissions reduction goals, as the remaining coal power plants are likely to continue operating. This limited approach may complicate Serbia's alignment with EU and global climate standards, highlighting a need for a more

comprehensive strategy to advance clean energy solutions and reduce reliance on coal in the years ahead.

In Serbia, coal mines are closely interwoven with the operations of nearby coal-fired power plants. This symbiotic relationship means that the long-term sustainability of these coal mines is deeply dependent on the continued operation of these power plants. According to the Serbian Energy Development Strategy (Republic of Serbia Ministry of Mining and Energy 2016), a strict adherence to the planned energy transition could put some 3000 coal mining jobs at risk over the course of the phase-out period. Beyond the coal mines, the potential closure of these power plants could jeopardise an additional 700 jobs in the power generation sector under a worst-case scenario. However, this figure accounts only for roles which are directly tied to power plant operations, assuming each facility functions as a standalone entity. In reality, most of these power plants are integrated within a larger national utility company, suggesting that the broader impact on employment could be much greater than the estimated figures. This integrated structure indicates that, as power plants are retired, there may be cascade effects across the utility company, affecting various departments and potentially leading to further job losses across related sectors and support services.

### *Challenges in emission cuts and the green transition*

Beginning with its first Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) submitted in June 2015, Serbia committed to the reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. In this initial pledge, Serbia aimed for a 9.8% reduction in GHG emissions by 2030 relative to 1990 levels. Building on this, Serbia submitted a new NDC in August 2022, setting a more ambitious target of a 33.3% reduction by 2030. This updated commitment reflects the country's growing dedication to climate action.

Further expanding its targets, Serbia formally adopted net GHG emission reduction goals in December 2022, covering emissions related to land use, land-use change and forestry (LULUCF), in line with the Energy Community Treaty. These efforts were also strengthened by the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which Serbia signed in 2020. Through this agreement, Serbia committed to a wide-ranging set of environmental initiatives such as promoting renewable energy, improving energy efficiency and advancing sustainable agricultural practices.

In 2024, Serbia adopted its Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (INECP) covering the period until 2030 with a vision extending to 2050 (Republic of Serbia 2024). The INECP sets the goal of reducing GHG emissions by 40.3% compared to 1990 levels. Central to this effort is Serbia's aim to invest significantly in renewable energy, with plans to add around 3.5 GW of new solar and wind capacity by 2030. This expansion is expected to bring the share of renewable sources to approximately 45% of electricity generation and contribute to renewables comprising 33.6% of gross final energy consumption by 2030. Additionally, lignite's share in electricity generation is projected to decrease by 25% compared to 2019 levels.

The country has introduced multiple strategies to diversify its renewable energy sources, including investments in wind, solar and hydropower. These actions align

with Europe's broader goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050. In pursuit of this objective, there is a recognised need to transition toward a low-carbon economy, with a commitment to implementing policies and practices that support this shift. However, the path to a successful green transition remains challenging, despite various initiatives aimed at promoting sustainability. Progress in implementing environmental commitments has been limited, primarily due to economic policies and internal incentives that remain misaligned with the nation's green goals (Akbar et al. 2022). Multiple barriers, including limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure and low public awareness of environmental issues, further complicate this transition. Additionally, political and economic factors frequently impede the necessary reforms, creating a complex landscape for achieving environmental targets.

Although there have been strides in reducing GHG emissions over the last two decades, the country's emissions intensity remains over 2.5 times higher than the European Union average, according to official International Energy Agency (IEA) data. Much of the nation's energy generation still relies on outdated and inefficient coal-fired power plants, yet the government has sent mixed signals about phasing them out. Unclear policies regarding the decommissioning of coal-driven facilities and their replacement with sustainable alternatives are creating an uncertain environment for potential investors, complicating efforts to transition to low-carbon energy sources.

The recent global surge in fuel prices has exacerbated these challenges, prompting the authorities to consider delaying the phase-out of coal-fired power plants. Such a delay risks embedding the nation in a carbon-intensive growth model which could have long-term economic and environmental repercussions. A clear, committed approach to sustainable energy transition, along with increased investment in renewable energy, will lie at the heart of meaningful progress toward green transition goals (Akbar et al. 2022).

## The role and position of trade unions

### *Low-carbon development and the impact on the labour market*

Serbia's coal mining sector is experiencing a steady decline in its labour force, a trend closely linked to the nation's ongoing decarbonisation efforts. The reduction in coal mining jobs is projected to continue as Serbia transitions to a greener energy framework. This shift is not only having an impact on employment levels within the industry but is also affecting the economic stability of communities that have long depended on coal mining for their livelihoods. As coal mining jobs decline, these regions face the challenge of adjusting to new economic realities and may require targeted support to develop alternative sources of income. To manage these impacts, a just transition strategy will be crucial, including reskilling programmes and economic diversification efforts to help affected workers and communities adapt to a low-carbon economy.

A comparable decline in labour force participation is also evident in the petroleum derivatives sector and in electricity production. This trend is primarily being driven by a transformative shift in the electricity generation mix, which is ex-

pected to evolve significantly up to 2050. The transition away from labour-intensive lignite-fired power plants toward more efficient and less labour-intensive renewable energy technologies signifies a profound restructuring of the energy landscape.

While this shift is significant in terms of achieving environmental sustainability and addressing climate change, it raises critical concerns about potential job losses in traditional energy sectors. The decreasing demand for fossil fuel-based energy production means that many workers in these industries are facing unemployment alongside reduced job opportunities. Consequently, there is an urgent need for targeted workforce retraining and reskilling programmes to equip affected employees with the skills necessary to transition into emerging sectors within the green economy.

The INECP is playing a pivotal role in defining Serbia's energy and climate objectives. However, it falls short in offering either a comprehensive analysis or sufficient measures to ensure a just transition for those workers who will be affected by these changes. In contrast, a just transition will be vital in maintaining social equity during the shift to a low-carbon economy as it seeks to address the pressing need for robust support systems and opportunities for affected workers to transition into new employment sectors, helping to mitigate the adverse effects of job displacement.

Recognising this gap in the current strategy, the development of a Just Transition Diagnostic Study is anticipated in the near future. This study is expected to deliver critical insights and strategies that will assist in pinpointing the necessary steps to support workers and communities affected by the transition from fossil fuels. By focusing on workforce retraining, skills development and job creation in emerging sectors, the study aims to lay the groundwork for an equitable energy transition. Furthermore, the Just Transition Diagnostic Study is likely to examine best practices from other regions that have successfully navigated similar challenges, providing a roadmap for implementing effective policies tailored to local contexts. Engaging stakeholders – including labour unions, community organisations and government agencies – in the diagnostic process will be vital in ensuring that the perspectives and needs of workers are prioritised. Ultimately, the insights gained from this study will contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable energy transition in Serbia, promoting economic resilience and social cohesion as the country moves towards its climate goals.

### *The importance of trade unions in Serbia in addressing the governance challenges involved in decarbonisation and climate change*

The ambitious goals set by the Paris Agreement are expected to catalyse significant social and economic transitions within a relatively short timeframe, compelling signatory states, including Serbia, to adapt and restructure towards 'greener' systems of production and consumption. This transition is not only designed to foster technological advance and economic prosperity but also to create new jobs and to drive social innovation.

Trade unions play a crucial role in this context in advocating the rights and interests of workers as the transition unfolds. There is no doubt that the transition will yield positive effects both globally and locally, including improved air quality and reduced energy dependence. Moreover, it presents an excellent opportunity for

job creation and the enhancement of knowledge and technological capacity in environmental protection. However, a just transition will not happen without the active involvement of trade unions. To harness the economic potential of this transition in full, stable policies, effective planning and substantial investments are essential – efforts that unions must support and influence (Milutinović 2023).

Workers and communities dependent on fossil fuels will not find alternative sources of income in the immediate short-term. Therefore, the transformation requires not only the gradual phasing out of the most polluting sectors but also concerted efforts by trade unions to ensure the creation of new jobs, investment in emerging industries and opportunities for skills development. Strong, coherent industrial policies, championed by unions, are critical to supporting both developing and traditional sectors, and can drive the implementation of more efficient and sustainable production processes.

A just transition is rooted in the principle that no-one should be left behind. In regions historically reliant on coal and oil production, revitalising communities through investments in clean energy, new industries and job creation is vital. Trade unions are instrumental in calling for investments in low- and zero-emission public transport systems, clean energy and a circular economy. In the industrial sector, the shift to renewable energy must be accompanied by 'clean' industrial processes and unions must ensure that workers are equipped with the necessary skills for this transition (Milutinović 2023).

Collective bargaining, led by trade unions, is the pathway to a just transition, ensuring that workers receive the support needed for retraining and a fair distribution of the new opportunities. Ultimately, a just transition offers the government a unique opportunity to address the three intertwined challenges of climate change, rising inequality and social inclusion.

From a worker perspective, the transition will reshape the labour market, introducing both new risks and opportunities. While new jobs will emerge, some existing occupations may be phased out or replaced, necessitating new competencies and skills. Certain sectors and regions, especially those dependent on carbon-intensive industries, are likely to face the greater challenges. Anticipating these trends and their impact on workers should be at the forefront of unions' activities. By managing climate-related policies and their planning, unions can gain a better understanding of the changes and their implications for climate policy.

According to the ILO guidelines on a just transition (International Labour Organization 2015):

... sustainable development is only possible with the active involvement of the workforce.

Governments, employers and workers must act as agents of change, capable of developing new methods of working that protect the environment, eradicate poverty and promote social justice through sustainable enterprises and decent work for all.

Union participation in shaping medium and long-term decarbonisation strategies lies central to the realisation of a just transition. With this in mind, unions should be striving for consistent and formalised participation, ensuring social dialogue is em-

bedded within the policymaking process, facilitating the integration of strategies for reindustrialisation, innovation, clean technology adoption and investment in green infrastructure.

Furthermore, appropriate institutional arrangements that enable participation at all levels – national, regional, sectoral and especially local – must be established, particularly in communities expected to be at the forefront of the transition. Consultations must encompass all key policy areas relevant to the decarbonisation process, including macroeconomic policies; industrial, sectoral and enterprise-level strategies; skills development; occupational health and safety; social protection; active labour market policies; and workers' rights. Trade unions must be at the centre of these discussions to ensure that the transition is equitable and inclusive for all workers. Further activities should encompass the following (European Trade Union Confederation 2020; Milutinović 2023):

1. Economic diversification and industrial policies

Advocating integrated industrial policies that promote sustainable development is crucial. This includes establishing a clear regulatory framework to foster the creation of green jobs. Policies should also encourage technological innovation and investment in clean energy and efficient industrial processes, particularly within energy-intensive sectors. Furthermore, attracting international and national investments in green technologies, heightening the benefit of programmes like Horizon 2020 and national innovation funds, is particularly important. Unions should be involved in managing these funds to support a just transition for workers in regions affected by economic changes.

2. Education and skills development

Investment in education and training initiatives will ensure that workers can adapt to new roles in renewable energy and energy efficiency. By prioritising reskilling efforts, the country can mitigate the social impacts of this energy transition and create a workforce that is capable of thriving in a sustainable economy. Here, national training strategies must be able to draw on successful European practices in low-carbon policies. This involves adjusting education and vocational training systems to align with the emerging job opportunities arising from decarbonisation. Engaging unions through the establishment of sectoral councils will help address future skill needs, especially in sectors like energy, mining and transport. Mechanisms for information and consultation at enterprise level are also necessary to anticipate changes in competencies and to monitor the implementation of training related to climate policies.

3. Management and industrial relations

Achieving sustainable development goals is more likely to be realised where a just transition is integrated into national plans. Unions' active participation in discussions on low-carbon strategies and policies will enhance the implementation of these. Moreover, establishing an institutional framework for union participation across all levels is essential, as is promoting social dialogue to assess the impacts of industrial policies. Expanding collective bargaining to include low-carbon transition issues will address the employment, wages and retraining needs.

4. Social protection and occupational health and safety

Creating effective social protection systems is necessary to shield the population from adverse economic impacts during the transition. This includes integrating social protection measures with climate policies, particularly with regard to vulnerable workers. Assessing the risks related to climate change for occupational health is crucial, along with implementing protective measures and training for green jobs. Unions should advocate for the protection of employees' rights during the transition process, particularly concerning asset devaluation.

5. Internal functioning and change management within unions

A just transition should be a political priority for trade unions. In this cause, raising awareness among union members about climate change effects plays a major role. Conducting a needs analysis within the union will help define training requirements and will also facilitate the securing of appropriate resources. In addition, collaborating with broader alliances can further promote a just transition to a low-carbon economy.

## Conclusion

The green transition represents a critical movement towards sustainable practices that aim to reduce significantly the impacts of economic activity on the environment, while promoting economic growth and enhancing social equity. As the country embarks on this vital but challenging journey, the difficulties posed by its heavy dependence on fossil fuels, particularly coal, highlight the urgent need for comprehensive reforms. Serbia's commitment to aligning with European Union standards and fulfilling its international obligations, such as the Paris Agreement, necessitates transformative changes in energy production, consumption patterns and industrial practices.

Currently, the energy sector in Serbia is heavily reliant on coal, which accounts for 67% of electricity production and is the primary source of greenhouse gas emissions. This dependence poses considerable environmental and economic challenges, especially as the country aims to transition to cleaner energy sources. The planned partial decommissioning of older coal-fired power plants marks a positive step forward, but it does raise significant concerns regarding potential job losses and the future viability of coal mining in regions where it has historically been a major source of employment. Therefore, alternative strategies must be developed that ensure a just transition for the workers affected by these changes.

Trade unions play an indispensable role in representing workers and protecting their rights and interests during this transition. Their active involvement is critical in guaranteeing that the economic opportunities generated by the green transition are equitable and inclusive. Through social dialogue and collective bargaining, trade unions can help shape policies that address the needs of workers in a rapidly transforming labour market. The forthcoming development of a Just Transition Diagnostic Study will be instrumental in identifying strategies to support the workers and communities affected by the decarbonisation process, ensuring they are not left behind.

In summary, while Serbia's path toward a low-carbon economy is fraught with challenges, it also presents significant opportunities for innovation, job creation and the improvement of social equity. A coordinated effort that includes government, trade unions and civil society will assist hugely in navigating these complexities and ensuring that the transition benefits all the stakeholders involved. By prioritising a just transition and actively addressing the challenges related to skills development, social protection and governance, Serbia can lay the groundwork for a sustainable and resilient future that respects both environmental integrity and the livelihoods of its citizens. This holistic approach will not only contribute to climate goals but also foster a more inclusive and equitable society.

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