34th NISPAcee Annual Conference 2026 – Sofia, Bulgaria

Empowerment of the Energy Transition Governance: Role and Opportunities of Sub-national Actors in Slovakia and Hungary

Author:

Mgr. Pavol Bors[1]

[1]***Institute of Public Policy – Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovak Republic, E-mail: pavol.bors@fses.uniba.sk***

Abstract:

The European Green Deal and the EU's Just Transition framework will increasingly require territorially grounded governance capable of managing the social and institutional complexity of energy transitions. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), however, the responsibilities and capacities of sub-national actors remain only partially defined, and their role in shaping transition pathways is still evolving. This paper will explore how local and regional governments in Slovakia and Hungary may contribute to energy transition governance under existing multi-level governance arrangements and path-dependent administrative structures.

Building on theoretical lenses of Multi-level Governance, Path Development, and Transition Management, the study will outline how national centralisation, limited fiscal autonomy, and administrative legacies could affect municipalities, regions, and other stakeholders' ability to translate EU-level Just Transition goals into territorial strategies. The paper will examine how future governance arrangements might create opportunities for stronger sub-national agency, including clearer mandates, enhanced participation in strategic planning, and new mechanisms for mobilising regional knowledge and stakeholder networks.

At the same time, the paper will emphasise the challenges and limitations that may constrain these opportunities. These include the persistence of highly centralised decision-making; fiscal dependency on national authorities; weak administrative capacity; fragmented competences; and limited access to reliable data, expertise, and analytical tools. Political volatility, uneven representation in national planning processes, and potential tensions between local interests and national priorities may further restrict the influence of sub-national actors. Moreover, the social and economic vulnerabilities of coal-dependent regions, combined with path-locked energy infrastructures, may intensify resistance to structural change and reduce the scope for collective action.

The comparative focus on Slovakia and Hungary will assess how sub-national actors currently engage with energy transition governance and highlight possible trajectories of sub-national empowerment across differing political–institutional settings. Based on the qualitative analysis of EU, national, and regional policy documents, complemented by semi-structured interviews with local and regional government representatives, energy-sector stakeholders, and social partners, the paper examines how Just Transition objectives are interpreted, operationalised, or constrained at the territorial level. This empirical approach allows the study to identify concrete governance practices, institutional bottlenecks, and variations in sub-national involvement in strategic planning and implementation processes.

The paper aims to contribute to current debates on local governance in the energy transition, demonstrating how empowering sub-national actors may become crucial for ensuring locally responsive, legitimate, just, and socially inclusive transition pathways in CEE, considering the current possibilities and limitations of these actors.

Keywords:

Energy Transition, Governance, Central Europe, Actors, Local Governance