

# Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode: Just Transitions – a global exploration: Russia

Speakers: Mattia Dessì and Olga Ustyuzhantseva

[00:00:00] **Mattia:** Hello and welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Mattia Dessì, a postgraduate researcher at Leeds University Business School.

[00:00:13] **Olga:** And I'm Olga Ustyuzhantseva, a researcher doing the study of Russian case.

[00:00:18] **Mattia:** And in today's episode of the “Just Transition - a global exploration” series, I'm going to be speaking to Olga about just transition and coal in Russia. So welcome, Olga, to the podcast. You have a number of research interests but today we're going to be focused on Russia and coal, a very important topic at the moment, and I'm going to start by asking you, what is the state of the energy transition in Russia and how does the state view it?

[00:01:04] **Olga:** Okay. Thank you. Russia is declaring itself as a clean energy country, mostly due to its huge potential in atom energy, in gas energy. Most energy damaging activity is actually in the export of fossils. According to some estimations, emissions from the fossil fuel exported from Russia amounted to 2 billion tons in terms of CO2 equivalent. It's a huge amount. But inside the country, there is no agenda about energy transition because Russia seems to be quite clean in creating energy from different various sources other than coal that are quite dirty. So, the main point, main concern of Russian government about energy transition is actually the economic agenda that is rising after activating the cross border carbon tax that actually changed the rules of the game for Russia exporting fossil in a huge amount.

And, here we see how economic factors get into force. This is also quite good seeing in the way how Russia actually justifies its climate policy. It's also about providing energy security for the country that still is going to increase its export of fossil fuels, of coal. And when we look at measures that Russia undertakes for climate policy, for example, it is also about mitigating economic effects, creating registries and verification of carbon emission, and also trying to calculate the absorbing capacity of Russian nature, such as forests, swamps, and plants. So generally, energy transition is not the case for Russia.

[00:02:56] **Mattia:** That's very interesting. And what is the role of coal specifically within this political discourse and what's the policy dimension specifically around this commodity?

[00:03:10] **Olga:** Coal is very important for Russia mainly, and mostly because of the metallurgy sector, iron and steel sector, of course. Heating and electricity production is not so much dependent. Russia is not much dependent on. But it's very important for Siberian regions, where coal actually is extracted. And also, there is actually one region in Siberia that is very much dependent on coal and socioeconomic importance of coal is very, very high there.

It's the Kuzbass - Kemerovo region. This region mines coal for almost a century. And the whole region, almost all settlements are built around coal mines. They are expanding in the opencast mines, but still almost all population, all families in this way or another are dependent on coal. The public discourse is on the stage of discussing ecological impact of coal. People living in this region cannot deny this impact of coal. It's very visible. They experience black snow. They experience heavy air, dense with coal particles. There is a high level of diseases and mortality rate.

However, these problems do not create any request for changes in energy or industry structure. I would say vice versa: coal is considered a common good, and the reason for proud for locals, and it's understandable because the region is built on coal. And talking about the state agenda, the state is framing coal in the same way.

It is planning on increasing coal mining, and at the same time trying to introduce clean coal technologies and diversify economy of mining region. Not radically escaping coal but creating the capacities for producing advanced machineries or technologies for the coal industry. This is the situation about coal here.

[00:05:21] **Mattia:** It's something that I think Russia shares also with another country, where coal is very important, which is South Africa. And we both did some research in South Africa, and one of the things that kind of monopolizes the discourse in South Africa is the importance of coal mining for creating jobs.

And this brings me to the next and last question. What is actually the role of the labour movement in the coal industry in Russia. And what kind of role does it have within the discourses that you have just mentioned?

[00:05:59] **Olga:** Yeah. Coal trade unions were very important for collapsing the USSR in 1990s. Exactly coal trade unions played significant role in the destabilization of the country regime. But nowadays, trade unions are organized in formal structures. They are vertically integrated, and they are fulfilling the role of negotiators between business and government on a different level, like regional or federal, and the main focus of trade unions is about a level of salaries, safety of work (the rate of accidents and underground mining is still high), and negotiation, some other social contract issues, I would say so.

And, in questions of energy transition and climate change policy, trade unions are taken kind of pro-government position: coal is the basis for socioeconomic prosperity for coal workers and coal regions. So we see that this policy, this governmental position, assures workers that they are safe with their jobs.

This is on one hand. On the other hand, there is one trend in Russia - the structure of working market in coal mining. More and more miners, I mean, enterprises, owners of miners, they bring foreigners from neighbouring countries to work in mines. And this creates the situation when grassroots activity of workers, miners, is blurred, is destabilized because they actually are very afraid

to lose job because of this migration processes, but not due to changing any changes in industry structure or energy structure. I believe that in South Africa, it was the same case - yeah?

[00:08:04] **Mattia:** Yeah, it was very similar. I guess it's also due to the fact that coal mining is specifically localized in a certain region and because of the general social context, is the main employer in that region. And this creates an entire series of consequences.

[00:08:24] **Olga:** Yeah. And just transition is not a widely known term in Russia and among labour communities in particular. Just, I mean, just transition, just is still about just salary and social contract. And state policy assures workers that they're safe from this point of view.

But when talking about informal activity, there are some protest activities of local people, but they protest against ecological disaster. And their measures are quite interesting. They address foreign governments, like to the Canadian Prime Minister, to accept them as refugees, ecological refugees. They address international organizations to help solve the ecological disaster. But again, these requests are not connected to climate change or energy transition at all. Main request is more for ecologically safe environment.

[00:09:22] **Mattia:** Thanks. Thanks so much Olga.

[00:09:24] **Olga:** Thank you.

[00:09:25] **Mattia:** And thanks to you for listening. If you want to know more about the project and about the podcast series, please have a look at the other episodes, and see you next time.