Executive Summary

• For the global community, transitioning to a more sustainable energy system is a must. But change requires challenging existing norms, and social and economic institutions. Some will be affected or will benefit more than others. A just transition acknowledges that the social, environmental and economic aspects matter, and are a crucial component of the energy transition.

• The decarbonisation of economies worldwide requires a managed structural transition. Without active guidance, structural change in unregulated market economies is likely to cause and exacerbate inequalities. The resulting socio-economic inequalities might further contribute to the current surge in populism, and to the political exploitation of climate change as an identity issue (“them against us”). Thus, the guiding principle for a structural transition to a low-carbon economy must be a just transition.

• Foreign policy will play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. It can foster international dialogue and bring stakeholders with (real or apparent) antagonistic interests to the table. It can help set a policy agenda that shares the benefits of change more equally. As the main driver of multilateralism, foreign policy can play a key role in shaping international energy and climate policy. It has the potential to facilitate global decarbonisation through energy and climate diplomacy. Foreign policy is therefore very well equipped to initiate, coordinate and streamline policies around a just transition, thus becoming a vehicle for sustainable development and facilitating the implementation of just economic and social policies.

• This Policy Brief builds a bridge between foreign policy and the underlying economic and social changes which arise as part of the challenges of the energy transition. It provides the reader with a set of clear policy recommendations for the foreign policy community. Measures proposed here include, firstly, the empowerment of foreign policy as an actor of change in the just transition discourse through the emphasis on multilateralist approaches, efficient governance structures and smart regulation. Secondly, by analysing existing practices and identifying possible common approaches to a successful and fair energy transition, foreign policy can help stabilise and reinforce institutional structures. Thirdly, foreign policy can help develop a convincing narrative for the debate on a just energy transition to effectively mainstream policy measures, tools and good practices.
Das Progressive Zentrum (DPZ) is an independent, non-profit think tank founded in 2007, devoted to establishing new networks of progressive actors from different backgrounds and promoting active and effective policies for economic and social progress. It involves especially next generation German and European innovative thinkers and decision-makers in the debates. Its thematic priorities are situated within the three programmes “Future of Democracy”, “Structural Change” and “International Relations”, with a particular focus on European integration and the transatlantic partnership. The organisation is based in Berlin and also operates in many European countries (including France, Poland and Great Britain) as well as in the United States.

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