

BIG FISH, LITTLE FISH

THE STRUGGLES OF POLAND'S SMALL TOWNS

ARTICLE BY

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Of the more than 900 towns and cities in Poland, only a handful of larger ones – hailed as ‘development locomotives’ – are thriving, while the rest lag behind. Life in these towns can be even harder than in the rural areas, hitherto regarded as the most deprived places in the country. Yet, some small cities are now blazing trails of their own – devising and implementing new development models.

Throughout history, Poland’s cities never gained as much independence and strength as their Italian or German counterparts. They have never been as significant politically and economically as in Western Europe. In the 16th century, when the economic rift started to emerge in Europe, Poland found itself on the side of those who supplied simple resources such as cereals or timber. This conserved the agricultural landscape of the Polish economy for centuries. Attempts at founding cities based on carefully considered plans, such as the Renaissance city of Zamość, were hardly the rule. And the pre-Communist industrial revolution on the other hand only created a handful of cities, such as Łódź and Żyrardów, but their story did not fit the predominantly aristocratic historical narrative founded on attachment to land.



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**JAK BYĆ MAŁYM
MIASTEM I PRZEŻYĆ
W POLSCE:
PRAKTYCZNY
PORADNIK**

Małe miasta, dotąd pozostawiane na uboczu procesów modernizacyjnych w Polsce, dziś stają się laboratoriami zmiany.

After the fall of the Berlin wall, the new reality was again influenced by the past and Polish cities were not recognised as important public policy actors. They were merely treated as a legacy, something that simply had always been there. Meanwhile, the agricultural sector had a dedicated ministry, and later on, a Ministry of Regional Development was also created. During the transition period, cities had to fend for themselves, and the neoliberal testing ground of Poland’s economy did not offer them many opportunities for harmonious development.

UNEVEN TRANSITION

In 2009, 20 years after the break-up of the Eastern Bloc, the Civic Platform (PO) government, led by the then Prime Minister Donald Tusk, released a report titled *Polska 2030*. The opening page contained a photo of the neoliberal PM, a serious and considerate expression on his face, and the following page – a photo of a team of over a dozen young specialists. “In the 380 pages of the report, a team of young economists, lawyers and sociologists led by Michał Boni (then a member of cabinet) outlines a fascinating picture of a country in transition, liberated by its in-depth transformation but at the same time imprisoned in deeply ingrained old civilizational patterns. *Polska 2030* tells a story of a country that has no present, only a constant strife between the past and the future. That’s because constant development is a defining feature of today’s Poland”¹ – such was more or less the tone of commentaries in the national media. The government had reasons to be optimistic, or at least so they believed. It had just been announced, with much publicity, that Poland was the only ‘green island’ in Europe, unaffected by the turbulence of the global crisis.

The report was fairly honest in diagnosing the situation: after the dynamic and not fully understood 1990s political transition, Poland

had begun to modernise. However, not all parts of it were modernising at the same pace: it was already clear that some regions lagged behind economically and socially. Shortly after Poland got connected to the drip of EU subsidies in 2003, it found itself in what the economists came to call “a middle-income trap” and its leaders started to look for a way out. The report acknowledged the disease, but the cure it offered was the so-called “polarisation and diffusion development” model in which support was to be provided to the big cities, christened as “development locomotives”, in the hope that they would work out solutions that would magically trickle down to smaller towns and villages.

If we were to use the liberals’ favourite metaphor of giving a fish versus teaching to fish, the Civic Platform government bravely decided that poor fishermen needed the technology to build an oceanic trawler more than they needed access to the local lake.

IN DIFFERENT LEAGUES

The effects of the deepening inequalities between Poland’s regions and cities were to become visible rapidly. They were amplified by the investment rush ahead of the Euro 2012 Football Championship, when the metropolitan cities were given stadiums

1 Wawrzyniec Smoczyński, *Polityka*, 17 June 2009. <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/rynek/294154,1,raport-polska-2030.read>

worth hundreds of millions of euros and hastily built motorways. Meanwhile, the provincial areas of Poland lacked basic social infrastructure elements such as crèches, healthcare facilities or public transport. Due to the dismantling of labour codes and the fact that Poland had the largest proportion of people working under 'junk' contracts in Europe, entire towns were practically excluded from the system of unemployment benefits, public healthcare or pensions. In some cases in the peripheries of the 'green island', you got paid just over 6 eurocents per hour of work peeling onions.

While the quality of life stagnated, anger grew. The small towns were increasingly frustrated by the widening contrast between the urban upper-middle-class lifestyles they saw in the TV soaps, and their own reality of having no prospects, which could not even be described for lack of adequate language. As the weak state had ceded more and more responsibility for education and historical policy to the Catholic Church and the Right, in 2010 it became a new tradition for young men from all over Poland to flock to Warsaw to join the Independence Marches and take it out on saplings lining the streets of the capital city which they hated. Nationalism became the foundation of a new class pride, in line with Walter Benjamin's insight that "behind every fascism, there is a failed revolution."

In 2013, a person living in a medium-sized Polish town (20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants) on average earned a mere 56 per cent of the earnings of a person working in a big metropolitan city. That was lower even than incomes in agricultural areas. The polarisation and diffusion model wreaked the most destruction on small cities and medium-sized towns. It was now a fact that their development lagged behind. In order to realise the scale of the phenomenon one needs to understand that of the 926 towns and cities in Poland, only 66 are relatively large urban centres, and only 10 are metropolitan cities with major agglomerations. The traditional division into rich urban areas and poor rural areas is no longer valid because the real developmental divide separates small and medium-sized towns from the rest of the country.

In the same year 2013, when the crisis of small towns was unfolding, Stefan Niesiołowski, a Civic Platform MP, responded to reports about large numbers of undernourished children in Poland by suggesting that they should forage for wild sorrel and mirabelle plums. However, while politicians seemed to consistently ignore the deepening inequalities in their constituencies, civil servants in local governments and ministries gradually started to describe the reality using the language created by urban activists. It was thanks to the co-operation between the two groups that the National Urban Policy, the first ever document to emphasise the role and specific character of towns and cities, was developed.

In 2017, the Law and Justice Party (PiS), who identified and seized the political opportunity to claim to represent the underrepresented during the elections of 2015, unveiled its “Strategy of Responsible Development”. Despite containing many debateable visions for the country, its economy and its energy sector, it offers several concrete solutions to improve the development opportunities of neglected towns and small cities. The identification of 370 cities in need and the pledging of 650 million euros of government support are positive developments in this regard, with the caveat that small cities will still need to learn how to access the funds, and more importantly, how to make the best use of them.

IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE
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THE COSTS OF IMITATION

Before we move on to the small towns and cities, let us first look at the ten greatest ‘urban locomotives’: the capital city of Warsaw; the historic Krakow; Katowice with its massive agglomeration in southern Poland; Łódź in central Poland, which has only recently caught some favourable winds in its sails; Poznań and Wrocław in western Poland; Gdańsk which forms the coastal Tricity together with its two neighbours; Lublin in eastern Poland; and the similar-sized Szczecin and Bydgoszcz – the

latter involved in unending competition with Toruń, akin to the rivalry between Turin and Milan. When we look at the way those metropolitan cities have been modernising,

we easily notice that they have been colonised by certain Western models and patterns. A ‘childhood disease’ that was particularly common in the cities during the last decade concerned a fascination with a simplified version

of Richard Florida’s creative class concept. However, much more damage was done by ideas which had long been discarded beyond Poland’s western borders as harmful to the people and the environment, such as the belief in development through oversized investments and expensive sporting events.

Obviously, following foreign examples is not always bad. In some cases, such transplants are good and serve people well: pocket parks and *woonerfs* (living streets) which Łódź has come to love, are a case in point. Those solutions owe their success to their small scale, appropriateness to the inhabitants’ needs and high-quality of implementation. Much more often, however, the policy of imitation engenders massive costs, as has been the case with Warsaw and the expressways it built within, rather than outside the city, or Poznań, which is one of the cities still paying for their large and expensive

stadium. The mayors of the 'locomotives' failed to notice that in the cities they were imitating, football was much stronger than in Poland, allowing the stadiums to support themselves, and traffic services were more efficient in preventing transit traffic from pouring into inner cities. Another bizarre case concerns the construction of the Gdynia Kosakowo airport, located just 32 km away from the functioning and not overly congested Lech Wałęsa airport in Gdańsk. The pointless project was co-funded by an EU subsidy, but the airport never opened. These are examples of superficial imitation without any guarantee of success.

THOU SHALT MODERNISE

Let us come back to the liberals' favourite fish metaphor and the more than 800 small towns which have just been taught reasonably good fishing techniques and given access to fish in the form of universal social programmes, and on top of that stand a chance of benefitting from what is called 'premium for backwardness'. They could avoid repeating the mistakes made by the big cities. Unfortunately, not all of them do.

In many places, brain-drain, the weakness of the local media and social control, shortage of new ideas and isolation have conserved social relations which resemble a tribal model more than they do a mature local democracy.

Activists in big cities often decry the so-called 'new public management' model and protest that the city is not a business, but in the small towns it would be more adequate to shout that the city is not a *folwark*². It would be, but there is usually no-one to do the shouting. Robust urban movements are seldom found in cities of less than 50,000 inhabitants, and individual whistleblowers quickly get intimidated and silenced. It would be a mistake to cherish an idyllic vision of small towns as sanctuaries of national health, traditions and harmonious life.

The other sin of which the small-town local governments in Poland are guilty concerns the superficiality of their notion of modernisation. While Poland's large cities understand 'modernity' to mean the solutions implemented in the past by global metropolitan cities, even if they are now considered to have been mistakes, small towns tend to repeat the mistakes of the big cities, to which they add quite a lot of their own inventiveness. It is not unusual to see destroyed urban landscapes where century-old trees have been cut down in the central market squares to give way to concrete paving arranged in fancy patterns, and where public spaces have been transformed into empty, barren plots. Such things happen in cities which see their heritage as nothing more than an open-air museum and understand modernisation to mean incessantly transforming urban spaces into ever wider roads and ever bigger parking lots.

2 *Folwark* is a serfdom-era farm where the landlord's will was often the ultimate law. It used to form the basis of Poland's agricultural economy.

SILVER LININGS

But is this one-sided picture not too pessimistic? Of course, it is. There are plenty of small and medium-sized cities which are testing grounds of urban transformation, despite the unfavourable conditions in which they have to operate. Take housing, one of the biggest problems in Poland. A positive example in this regard comes from Ostrów Wielkopolski, a small town in central Poland. No other place in Poland can match its affordable housing scheme where 171 apartments have already been delivered to tenants, primarily young and low-income, and the number keeps growing. Ostrów seized its opportunity as early as the 1990s when it established a municipal housing company. Thanks to the self-financing nature of the scheme, the first investments have now been fully repaid, and the Ostrów system has inspired the concept of the national governmental programme launched in 2017.

Słupsk, a city of under 100,000 inhabitants near the Baltic coast, had long been considered to be lagging behind and capable of competing only with its slightly bigger neighbour, Koszalin. However, since Robert Biedroń, originally an LGBTQiA activist, took over as the city's president, Słupsk has managed to enter a partnership with IKEA to upgrade its lighting, and to launch an unprecedented revitalisation programme which features massive involvement of housing communities, companies and NGOs.

Good examples do not necessarily have to come from towns with progressive governments. Small Brzeziny near Łódź, governed by a fairly conservative mayor, has hired the town's unemployed to do renovation works and promoted the development of social co-operatives. Towns and cities located in more peripheral locations face different challenges. Gorzów Wielkopolski, a city of 117,000 inhabitants located a mere hour's drive from Berlin, has successfully taken on multiculturalism, a rare phenomenon elsewhere in Poland. Back in the 1960s, Gorzów was where Poland's Roma were forced to settle. Today a Roma community of several hundred people lives in the city centre. Instead of seeing this as a problem, as the much larger Wrocław does, Gorzów decided to integrate its Roma inhabitants through culture. The Romane Dyvesa culture festival has become its flagship promotional brand.

Positive stories can be found even in very small towns of 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants. For example, tiny Dobiegniew near Gorzów has a model Social Integration Centre and is one of the best-performing towns in the governmental Model Revitalisation scheme. Nearby, picturesque Barlinek, which used to be called 'little Berlin' before World War II, has successfully promoted itself as an excursion destination for pensioners from the other side of the border.

The transition period has left Poland's towns and cities with a legacy of serious problems caused by the privatisation of public services, which led to rising utility bills in most homes in Poland. While Berlin and other Western cities seek to re-municipalise their utilities, in Poland a debate on re-municipalisation is still unthinkable. But Leszno, for example, a town located between Poznań and Wrocław, has never privatised its heat and power plant and has been able to act on energy poverty. Starachowice, a town located in the Świętokrzyskie region, one of the most disadvantaged areas of the country, also sought and found a creative way to avoid privatisation: it transformed the upper floor of its municipality-owned shopping centre, which had proved difficult to rent out, into a comprehensive facility for seniors, at the same time driving the business of the shops downstairs.

All those ideas have three things in common. Firstly, they are not imitations and are based on local potential. Secondly, they are creative attempts at using the existing regulatory tools or overcoming their limitations. Finally, they were conceived by local visionaries who had the trust and support of the local governments. Even though the local governments in question represent various political views, the Far Right is almost non-existent in the cities mentioned here. Smaller cities and towns are capable of working out their own development models without resorting to imitation or having unfit models imposed on them.

It is quite easy to predict a future in which government assistance will give a boost to such innovating cities, while in others, the 'helicopter money' will only conserve the tendency to think in terms of parking lots and follow *folwark*-era habits. This is why formal and informal networks for the exchange of experiences among the constellation of Poland's towns and small cities have such an important role to play. If we manage to overcome the old tendency of smaller urban centres to focus on their own backyard only, and if we succeed in building solidarity between them, things will move forward by themselves, even without much government investment. If not, the gap between towns and small cities on the one hand, and large cities on the other, will continue to widen, followed by the spectre of rising radicalisms.



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