

A Just Transition for Polish Industry

Article by Bartłomiej Kozek

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Faced with looming mine closures, layoffs in aviation, and struggling with school closures and transport exclusion, Poland's regions need to rethink their industrial strategy to secure their future. Bartłomiej Kozek makes the case here for a just transition and reimagining the role of fossil-fuel dependent regions for a new, green industrial revolution.

Non-renewable energy sources have fuelled global economic growth for decades, allowing many countries to reach unprecedented levels of welfare and quality of life. But fossil fuel combustion has pushed the world to a level of global warming of 1.1 degrees Celsius higher than that of the pre-industrial era. This has already resulted in a growing amount of extreme and unusual weather events, melting glaciers, rising sea levels, and conflicts over food and natural resources such as water.

The last two years have seen unprecedented mobilisation of young people on the streets of cities across the globe, demanding decisive action and ecological justice. The electoral success of some green parties has also sparked hope in the possibility of limiting warming to the scientifically advised 1.5 degrees Celsius target. The stakes are high – as is the risk of failure – yet the current story about green transition fails to speak to and include certain social groups. This is no longer a problem for a single party or social movement but the planet itself. A key part of changing this is making the case for a just transition. This article looks at what this might look like in Poland.

Reclaiming the language of rights

One of the most promising possibilities for connecting the ecological and the social lies in a return to the language of human rights. For this to work, it is necessary to once more discover the complexity of human rights, which means going beyond their assertion of individual rights such as the right to freedom of speech or freedom of religion.

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The less-celebrated human rights – that activists have been accused of neglecting – are social rights, such as the right to work, to organise in a union, to social security, to housing, to medical care, or to education. These issues are mentioned in the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Recentring these social and economic rights into the broader, rights-based narrative is crucial – and even more so when we want to add environmental rights to the equation. It is hard to include an environmental agenda, such as protecting natural resources for future generations, in a story in which human rights are blind to material conditions of human life and are limited to issues such as independence of the judiciary.

A practical application of this holistic approach to human rights is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 goals, passed by the UN General Assembly in 2015, replaced the Millennium Development Goals and form a truly global action plan for humanity. Issues such as access to education, climate action, innovation, health, hunger and poverty, and democratic institutions are viewed as interrelated and equally important. As well as promoting an integral approach to human rights, the goals support an important trend towards holistic public policy-making, replacing compartmentalised thinking with a broad and integrated vision of a more people- and planet-friendly world.

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Ecology is political. It cannot simply rely on actions and proposals taken from a supposedly neutral, objective, technocratic path of achieving environmental goals. If we limit ourselves to policy instruments limited to environmental protection, we risk negative side effects that will curtail democratic support for political ecology. Research by the think tank Breugel highlights how environmental protection measures (such as fuel taxes or environmental standards for products) when enacted without social measures (such as public investment or strengthening the social safety net) are mostly regressive and hit the poorest hardest (with some notable exceptions such as levies on air travel).

In the Polish context then, as in many other places, a green politics that can attract support across society must go beyond environmental goals and offer a credible vision for future prosperity that builds on the industrial heritage of regions such as Silesia.

A Green New Industrial Deal for Silesia

A green transformation can be a vehicle for improving quality of life even in regions whose wealth has been built on fossil fuels, such as the Polish region of Silesia. Experts on the region point out that moving away from coal does not have to mean mass layoffs or rapid mine closure, but can be achieved fairly through a combination of reskilling support for workers and not replacing workers as they enter retirement.

Three sectors look particularly promising for developing a regional green economy: construction, renewable energy, and transport. A necessary start in the buildings sector is deep thermal insulation of homes, lowering energy demand and reducing living costs. This is an important social issue – approximately 12 per cent of Polish households are at risk of energy poverty.

In the case of renewables, it is important to note the decreasing cost of renewable energy worldwide. An ambitious plan to install photovoltaic panels on private and public buildings would lead to financial savings for both people and institutions, create jobs, boost the renewables market, and create opportunities for Polish manufacturers.

Creating and implementing technologies that increase energy and resource efficiency will lead to a win-win situation

Unlocking the potential of onshore wind power, which was heavily curtailed by the ruling Law and Justice party in

2015, would be the next step. In order to avoid pre-2015 levels of local protests against wind turbines, regulations are needed that amplify the voices of local communities in the funding process and support community-led renewable energy cooperatives, and that grasp the full potential of job creation in the renewables sector.

In talking about Silesia, it is impossible to omit industry. Neglected and seen as a relic of the past, its role in the economy can, however, be reimagined as a source of innovation and decent jobs – an increasingly urgent issue in Europe as industrial jobs shift towards a small number of lucrative specialist contracts and low-paid, precarious employment for the rest.

Silesia has industrial and scientific potential concentrated in a relatively small area. Cooperation between these two sectors is necessary to address one of the biggest challenges facing the Polish economy: energy and resource efficiency. In Poland, twice as much energy and over three times as many resources as the EU average are needed to generate one additional percentage point to GDP. Creating and implementing technologies that increase energy and resource efficiency will lead to a win-win situation: reducing negative impacts on the environment and generating savings that can be reinvested or used to boost wages.

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An important part of a just transition should be extending freedoms – freedom from want, but also the agency and autonomy to shape local communities. The state, in particular, has an important role to play in this process – not just in terms of taking responsibility for and leading the process, but also in cooperating with local, regional, and European authorities.

It is vital that authorities see this progressive change as a prerequisite to (re)build welfare throughout Poland and give local communities the tools to become co-creators of this change. Social partners should be actively involved, controlling the process, looking out for potential negative side effects, fighting for the right to stable jobs, and ensuring the rights of workers in the renewables sector.

Eco-friendly aviation – made in Podkarpacie?

The set of proposals often presented across the world under the banner of a Green New Deal may be applied in other parts of Poland, once adapted to local economic contexts and challenges.

An example can be found in the south-eastern region of Podkarpacie. The potential for the region does not end with renewable energy, local agriculture, and sustainable tourism focusing on the multicultural legacy of the region. Industrial opportunities arise here as well, with this part of the country home to Aviation Valley, a cluster of businesses that one certainly does not associate with a stable climate. While aviation requires an overhaul in ticket pricing and transferring short-haul flights to rail, it is hard to see flying disappearing completely – which means the industry needs technological solutions to reduce emissions.

Why not think about the potential of this industry in a region whose capital Rzeszów has the highest number of students per capita in the European Union? Why not make it a national priority to invest in the research and development of low-carbon – or even carbon-neutral – aviation fuels and engines, in a region with an 80-year-old aviation industry? Such a step would require addressing serious challenges on the national level, such as Poland spending only around 1.2 per cent of GDP on research and development.

With the EU interested in slashing aviation emissions, such investment could attract European companies interested in solutions that could come from the factories and universities of the region. Using the European Green Deal and its industrial strategy as a starting point, the European Union should allocate funds for research and development in the sector that would increase both material and energy efficiency. It also seems logical that if different member states attach climate-friendly conditions to Covid-19 public aid for the aviation sector, they should be interested in developing measures that could reduce emissions such as producing hydrogen from renewables or electrification.

Leaving no one behind

Similar to policy-making on human rights, climate – and more generally environmental – policies must solve both social and ecological problems if they are to remain progressive. Opportunities for environmental investments that support a robust social policy should be sought after. Investing in thermal insulation or renewable energy, for example, may reduce costs for local authorities, allowing them to divert funds to other areas such as preventing school closures (something that has affected Poland in recent years).

Environmental policies should not be introduced at the expense of people's livelihoods. Increasing taxation on fuel without guaranteeing access to affordable public transport may aggravate transport exclusion. In Podkarpackie, access to public transport is limited due to a small rail network and insufficient bus options, especially in the countryside. Getting around, even to the nearest town, is a real challenge for people who do not own a car. An alternative would be to spend money raised from a carbon tax on thermal insulation or lowering taxes on labour for low- or medium-income earners, in the spirit of an ecological tax reform.

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Any false start to the transition risks making social mobilisation for climate action harder – or even impossible. This would harm not only future generations, forced to live in a decreasingly hospitable world but current ones too. Many parts of Poland were built on coal but the industry cannot be relied upon as a source of prosperity no longer. It is down to ecologists to stand up for social rights by making the case for a just transition.

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Bartłomiej Kozek is a journalist of Zielone Wiadomości (Green News), a Polish bi-monthly magazine and web portal presenting current affair commentary from a green point of view. He has been a secretary general of the Polish Green Party – Zieloni 2004 and one of the authors of the party's policy on social issues.

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