

## **From Activism to City Council: Momentum for a Just Transition in Upper Silesia, Poland**

**An interview with Łukasz Nowak, Patryk Białas**

December 7, 2018

**Residents of Katowice, the capital of the Upper Silesian Coal Basin, dream big about a green city: clean air and energy as well as strong social bonds developed by active citizen participation. The Silesian climate movement is based on the premise that you can take action in various areas – professional, social and political – regardless of age.** Yet this vision hardly suits everyone, and the problems faced are huge. 33 of the 50 most polluted cities in Europe are in Poland. Annually in the country smog kills between 46-48 000 people. In Katowice alone, there are 28 500 outdated boilers. Effectively solving the problem of smog would require a budget of 300 million Polish złoty, while the annual budget of the city of Katowice is 2 billion złoty. Łukasz Nowak interviewed the recently elected Katowice City Councillor Patryk Białas on his previous work as a climate activist and his aspirations for a truly just transition in the region.

**Łukasz Nowak: What made you become a climate activist and what fuels your enthusiasm?**

**Patryk Białas:** After the 2015 general election, distress and problems at work pushed me to seek a purpose in my life. I felt the need to do something for the common good, to have an impact. I took part in the ‘Urban Shift’ competition organised by the Repair Your City foundation and I started working on countering air pollution. I quickly decided to organise a competition for children – ‘A letter to clear air’. Following its success, and with even greater zeal, we started taking direct action and, with [the Polish Smog Alert](#), we organised happenings, during which we gave out anti-pollution masks and jarred clean air. We symbolically showed that there is something wrong with the air we breathe.

In January 2016, we set up the Katowice Smog Alert. Acting as leader, I made use of the Citizens’ Legal Initiative in Katowice, and we started collecting signatures. It took us two months to collect 900 signatures! The main aims of the legislation were to spend 30 million on replacing household stoves over a 10-year period, to launch an air pollution alert and information system for residents, and to secure funds for educational campaigns.

The draft ended up in the bureau of the city council and so we fed the issue to politicians and civil servants. Although it eventually fell through at a council session, that very session was important as the council increased the funds allocated for replacing stoves by 10 million and launched an information campaign – so up to a point, we were successful.

**What else have you been working on, since direct action was only a partial success?**

We created a regional Air Pollution Activists Academia and worked on a project to make a Social Map of Katowice by meeting with residents where they live and discussing their problems and potential solutions.

Because of these initiatives and the coinciding cooperation with the Silesian Regional Council on an anti-smog resolution, the marshal of the Silesian Province invited us to a press conference. We declared there that as a social organisation we would encourage residents to participate in the public consultations. With other Smog Alerts from the Małopolskie Province, we collected 5000 signatures under a petition to accelerate the work on legislation. Academics from the University of Silesia in Katowice and the Silesian University of Technology helped us to reach a critical mass.

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climate begin to develop bonds.

The anti-smog resolution was adopted on April 7 2017, the second such resolution in the country. Even though at the end of August the coal lobby tried to block it by proposing amendments, the marshal defended the resolution.

In May 2017, we founded the civic association BoMiasto. Among our aims were sustainable development (active participation in works on the low-carbon economy plan, tree-planting actions, and other green events) and the development of civic society (protests and educational work).

For our demands to be taken seriously by the city council, we have to enter politics. This is something we had argued for a long time and in a sense it helped us impose key issues for the campaign: air pollution, environmental protection, and green areas dominated the debates between candidates running for city mayor.

### **What makes you think that as city councillor you will have made it easier to do your job?**

From the very beginning of our social activism, we have been dubbed local politicians. Even when we had not officially engaged in politics, the media had presented us in opposition to the political authorities.

The cooperation with the Climate Reality Project – a non-profit organisation founded by former US vice president Al Gore – broadened my perspective to include activities related to climate change. “These are the times of engaged citizens”, said Gore.

In June, I left the Polish and Katowice Smog Alerts, convinced that to effectively work towards social and economic change I have to cooperate with politicians from different camps. The strength of activists lies in their impact on everyday urban life and a considered decision to enter politics makes it possible for us to shape legislation on behalf of the residents. Activists are experts, but they lose time and energy on details and, at the end of the day, it is the politicians who write the laws and shape the political system. Having observed the former city council in Katowice, I could see that it lacks a person who would work towards ‘Katowice with a better climate’.

### **So what exactly needs to be done in Silesia?**

A few months ago, when I started working with Climate Reality, I could sense where the change was leading us. At the time, the ‘Green Vision for Silesia’ was taking shape – a plan based on clean energy, a vision of the metropolis as a common good and on rising social awareness. Then we conducted opinion polls that engaged the residents in our vision. Inspired by all this, I decided to prepare the Social Climate Summit during the international climate conference, COP24.

First, we ran a survey online, the results of which will be presented during COP. Second, we invited residents to the Green Lab of Ideas during the summit, where we will prepare a diagnosis and a manifesto drawing a green vision of Silesia, a region with clean air, efficient energy use and energy produced locally from renewables.

The most important elements are visibility and continuous communications about our activities. This is how an environmental movement is born: the people already working individually for the climate begin to develop bonds.

Interestingly, we were not allowed to take part in the session for social actors at the social Pre-COP organised by the coal companies, under the auspices of the President of Poland and the mayor of Katowice. The main message during that event was that the climate crisis is a fake.

Before turning up at the Pre-COP we said loud and clear that the people want a different Silesia. They want to leave coal behind and they want a just transition, which means a transformation of the economy towards sustainable production with stable work places, sources of income and openness to dialogue with all actors, a transformation

away from the economy indifferent to residents and the environment.

### **How is the situation in Silesia similar to that of other places in Europe?**

There are numerous regions in Europe that want to be independent of coal. The Coal Regions in Transition platform makes it easier and allows for sharing experiences. Within this project regions present the European Commission with their plans of a just transition.

The Polish negotiators consist of two opposing interest groups. The government lobbies for coal projects and experimental extraction technologies, whereas the local government tries to smuggle in green economy solutions. The conflict is obvious.

### **What is the level of awareness of those directly affected by the transitions?**

People are already working towards transition – former miners are installing solar collectors on roofs, and so they don't have to carry heavy coal. When a mining school faces problems, it starts a class on renewables which receives more applications than it has places to offer. One in four Polish solar thermal collectors is produced in Silesia. We need to make sure that the changing energy sector provides enough jobs. Miners are workers whose skills and competence allow them to retrain and work as mechanics, plumbers or electricians. In Germany, former miners find jobs in mechatronics.

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Times have changed and working underground is no longer as attractive as it used to be. It's become less popular and it no longer guarantees very high salaries. Yet miners know only too well how risky, unrewarding and tough the job can be. They are determined to work in better conditions, in open air. They don't want their families to worry about their safety. And what about the distressed people who live in areas affected by regular mining-induced tectonic movements?

### **What are the possibilities for the residents to become decisive about their environment according to their needs and not according to somebody else's whim?**

From the beginning we have based our programme on the idea that there are no better experts than the residents. If the decision-makers disregard the people, their discontent is channeled into protests. Thus I believe we have to engage them in the decision-making process as much as possible.

The only efficient form of politics has to rely on evidence-based policy, which we lack. Technically, today's strategies are very professional, but they are not very ambitious and blur rather than clarify the big picture. Politics based on civic participation and evidence is the only sensible horizon.

### **How to engage people in the decision-making process?**

There can never be too much participation. That's why our campaign slogan was 'open office', which promotes an open office day for residents to come and meet the mayor. It was unthinkable earlier.

But, I think politicians should go out to the people and not the other way round. We need to reduce the distance and embolden people. Since I want to be a representative of the society, I would like to know their opinions, needs and ideas, so that I can act in their interest. This is possible only close to them, where they live and in conditions they consider comfortable. The city looks different from the perspective of a car or tram passenger or a pedestrian.

We all have lots of work in this respect. We can sit idly and wait for the transformation to occur. But we can also get involved in the process. We can speak out loudly about our problems and needs, and put ideas into practice in our local community or at work. We should make sure that we are heard by those who are elected to serve us, not to rule over us. Let us learn from the good practice of other places so that the transition is truly just – for the people, the local community and the environment.

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Łukasz Nowak is a social activist and promoter of empowerment and responsibility in Poland, working in the Poznań Food Co-operative, Nyeleni Polska, Green News, and other grassroots organisations. In his professional career as a graphic designer and video creator, he focuses on creating materials that promote a conscious lifestyle.



Patryk Białas is director of the Innovation and Competence Centre at the Euro-Centrum Science and Technology Park in Katowice. He works on regional development and the transfer and commercialisation of technology. He is also a clean-air and climate activist, and a Katowice city councillor since 2018.

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