

From Coal to Climate Action: Energy Transition In Poland

Article by Marek Nowak, Miłka Stępień

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Ahead of the COP24 climate conference in Katowice in December 2018, the international gaze turns to Poland as a pivotal point for climate action. Marek Nowak speaks to eco-activist and Green politician Miłka Stępień about the challenges of the green energy transition in Poland and how climate activists can make progress in an increasingly polarised political landscape.

Marek Nowak: Why should we move away from coal?

Miłka Stępień: The energy transition is an issue of Poland's highest national interest. It is not only a fundamental problem for the future of our country, but also for the future of Europe and the world. The environmental pollution that is taking an increasingly negative toll on our lives and health as well as the impact that burning coal is having on climate change are issues that make it essential to phase out coal as quickly as possible.

It is also worth mentioning various economic issues. If we do not move away from coal in Poland, this will mean an increase in the subsidies for this sector, which will be linked to a further gradual rise in energy prices and probably also to Poland's higher dependence on Russian coal.

This in turn brings us to yet another important issue – that of energy security. On the national level, it is frequently stated that we have to stick to coal for reasons of energy security. The situation is in fact the exact opposite. Along with the growing prices of this fossil fuel and the increasing dependence on Russian coal, our energy security level is declining rapidly.

If we were to shift the money that is today spent on subsidising the increasingly unprofitable coal industry and instead invest it in renewable energy sources, we would have much to gain. Energy diversification and the gradual increase of renewable energy sources in the Polish energy mix would not only ensure our society has easier and ultimately cheaper access to energy, but also significantly make us less dependent on energy supplies from abroad.

Opponents of the energy transition in Poland cite the myth of 'expensive green energy', which sees the concept of energy transition as ecologically legitimate but economically out of reach for middle-income countries like Poland. Do you agree that Poland cannot afford to develop its green energy?

We are currently subsidising coal to a very high extent – even though, to put it mildly, such investments are highly questionable. In Poland, the energy prices are currently rising rapidly, in part because we have so little electricity from renewable energy sources in our energy mix. Without changing this state of affairs, the costs of energy in Poland will only continue to rise.

In the meantime, renewable energy source prices – both from wind and solar sources – are falling. In the near future we should have access to good energy storage technologies, which will probably also have a positive impact on prices. Renewable energy sources also have a long-term return on investment. Even if we consider the initial financial input to be high, this investment will later be reimbursed with interest.

Mining carries cultural significance in Poland's mining regions, forming not just jobs but local community and identity. How can the energy transition be done in Poland so as to minimise the negative social impact?

I myself come from a mining family and from a mining region. As a teenager, I remember participating in St Barbara's Day and the men walking down our streets wearing hats with plumes.[1] My entire life has in some way

been linked to mining, so I know this culture and know how important it is for the region.

Certain myths evolve which have little to do with reality. For example, in Konin over the course of the last 30 years there has been a significant decline in employment in the mining and energy industries (over 70 per cent in comparison to the amount employed in 1990). Meanwhile, very few people locally are fully aware of this fact and as a result, the myth of the region's development is all the time seen as linked inextricably to the mining industry.

Mining is part of local history and this fact has to be acknowledged.

It is important that the myth of this mighty industry and industrial region be replaced with something else – by creating a new vision, but simultaneously expressing gratitude to the industry for its contribution to the region's development. Mining is part of local history and this fact has to be acknowledged. A museum of mining or other such post-industrial projects can be initiated, which is already taking place in various regions in the country. Various attempts at creating new visions are also already taking place. One such concept is the formation of a 'Valley of Energy' in Konin – something like the Silicon Valley in California. Of course, this is only a fledgling concept; however, it enables the creation of a new narrative and a sense of local pride.

The main problem in places such as Konin is the fact that, due to the collapse of the mining and coal-fired energy industry, there has also been a collapse in the sense of pride in the region. This is magnified by the fact that Konin has lost its status as the capital of the voivodship. [2] One noticeable aspect of this is a sense of regression, magnified by the fact that people's earnings are decreasing, there is an obvious decline in the amount of work available, migration is growing and the society is aging.

Another problem with places like Konin is that these territories have been left to a large extent to themselves. The state has not proposed any sort of concept for its development. Over the course of the next few years, two boilers will be closed down in the local coal-fired power plant, leading to further dismissals among people working in the mining and energy industries. Konin is to a large extent an economic monoculture: except for agriculture, and tourism, the region is focused mainly around heavy industry – primarily the energy and mining industry.

In Konin, the protests against the opening of open-pit mines were not only an example of explosive social energy, but also non-obvious political alliances. Can you tell me something about this as a person involved in these protests?

The main protests took place in the commune of Babiak – this is where the large open-pit mine 'Dęby Szlacheckie' was planned to be opened. I am going to be there over the next few days to meet with the people who initiated the referendum on the mine. 90 per cent of the participating inhabitants voted against this investment. Additional protests are taking place near the lakes as they are drying up in the East Greater Poland region. This is a huge problem as this area has experienced droughts over the last few years at an alarming rate.

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In terms of the non-obvious alliances you mentioned, during the 'Climate Camp' this year, which took place near Konin, there was a meeting with a local farmer, who talked about how the groundwater is disappearing due to the opening of open-pit mines and how this has influenced the crops in the region. It turned out that there were many differences in his opinions that set him apart from most of the people at the Climate Camp, who had left-wing political views, while this man was very conservative. But this happens quite frequently. In local meetings, it often turns out that what brings us together is the fight against the mining industry linked to the drought in the region,

but in terms of worldview we represent completely different values.

Not everyone has to become a member of the Greens, but when such non-obvious allies appear in relations to issues that are important for the party and for Poland maybe it makes sense to act together.

That is exactly how I work. As I mentioned, I am going to Babiak to meet with the local inhabitants, and I am sure there are many issues on which we have contrasting opinions.

Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki talks a lot about fighting against smog and electric cars, and the government subsidises certain branches of renewable energy sources such as geothermal sources and biomass. What is your opinion about the current government's political approach within this scope?

Geothermal solutions are actually very expensive and the return in terms of energy is actually not that high. It is also worth remembering that the current party in power introduced a bill that has halted the development of wind-powered energy in our country as well as the scandalous bill enabling the mass logging of trees.

The main problem PiS has is that the forming of an energy transition strategy requires an agreement across party lines. In order to fight smog, the solutions would have to be of a comprehensive nature – they would have to begin at the level of a commune, and later be continued on the regional level and then on the higher levels. In the Czech Republic, this is how the antismog programme functions – the government provides part of the subsidies for thermomodernisation and the replacement of coal-fired heaters, then the region and the commune provide additional subsidies. This functions well, because they have a multi-level, well-coordinated, mutually complementary system. It is necessary in Poland to develop an energy and climate strategy, which in fact is currently non-existent. PiS will not develop a strategy across party lines because it is a party that functions on the basis of divisions. In fact, so does Civic Platform, the liberal-conservative coalition in opposition.

It is possible to observe some attempt at creating a certain right-wing ecological narration put forward by the current government, but in my opinion, the rhetoric that is being formed around Pope Francis's encyclical 'Laudato Si' makes much more sense as it speaks about the necessity to fight against climate change and protect the environment and creates more space for dialogue.

Even though the last local elections in Poland can be referred to as a moderate success for the Polish Green party [read more on the [local elections in Poland](#)], the results still remain far below those of the German, Hungarian or even the Czech Greens. Are we observing the rise of a 'Green wave' in Poland?

The recent elections have shown that we have a lot of potential. It is increasingly easier to find people who want to vote green and membership subscriptions are rising. Issues such as smog and deforestation really have people in Poland interested. They really do want to have access to renewable energy, set up solar panels on their roofs, but they are frightened off by the huge initial costs and the lack of conducive legal regulations. If we were to create a programme that would actually provide them with such a possibility, it would garner a lot of interest.

In many places, the local elections transformed into a plebiscite for or against PiS, the current party in power. It could be said that the only winner of these elections was polarisation. How do we get the green message across when dealing with such strong divisions on the political scene?

These elections have convinced me that the Greens have to develop their structures outside the big cities. For many years we have focused on the metropolises, while the potential for growth is actually elsewhere. In my town of Konin, the Green list was supported by almost 4 per cent of the voters, so almost 2 per cent above our national average, but there were many smaller towns such as Ośno Lubuskie where the Greens had as much as 22 per cent! In Warsaw or Poznan the political scene is very crowded, and the polarisation there is much stronger.

What is your opinion of the European Union's climate policies from the Polish perspective?

Unfortunately, the situation is frequently such that even when reasonable solutions are proposed at the European level, they do not influence the situation in places where it should. The fundamental issue is that certain problems cannot be solved only at the European level – they should always take into account the specific local circumstances. There is often a lack of communication and one has to make noise to get some attention.

Frequently, statements are made publicly about the phasing out of coal, but the energy corporations are capable of smuggling in various solutions which have a negative impact on the climate. As on the local level, in the European Union various needs and interests clash, and as a result the needs and interests of our planet suffer, as do the interests of the smaller local communities, whose voices remain unheard.

[1] Patron saint of miners and other groups working with explosives.

[2] An administrative reform was implemented in 1999, which reduced the amount of voivodships in Poland from 49 to 16, leading to almost all the regional institutions in smaller towns being moved and resulting in the loss of revenues and employment.



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